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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY • ISSUE 197 • MARCH/APRIL 2005

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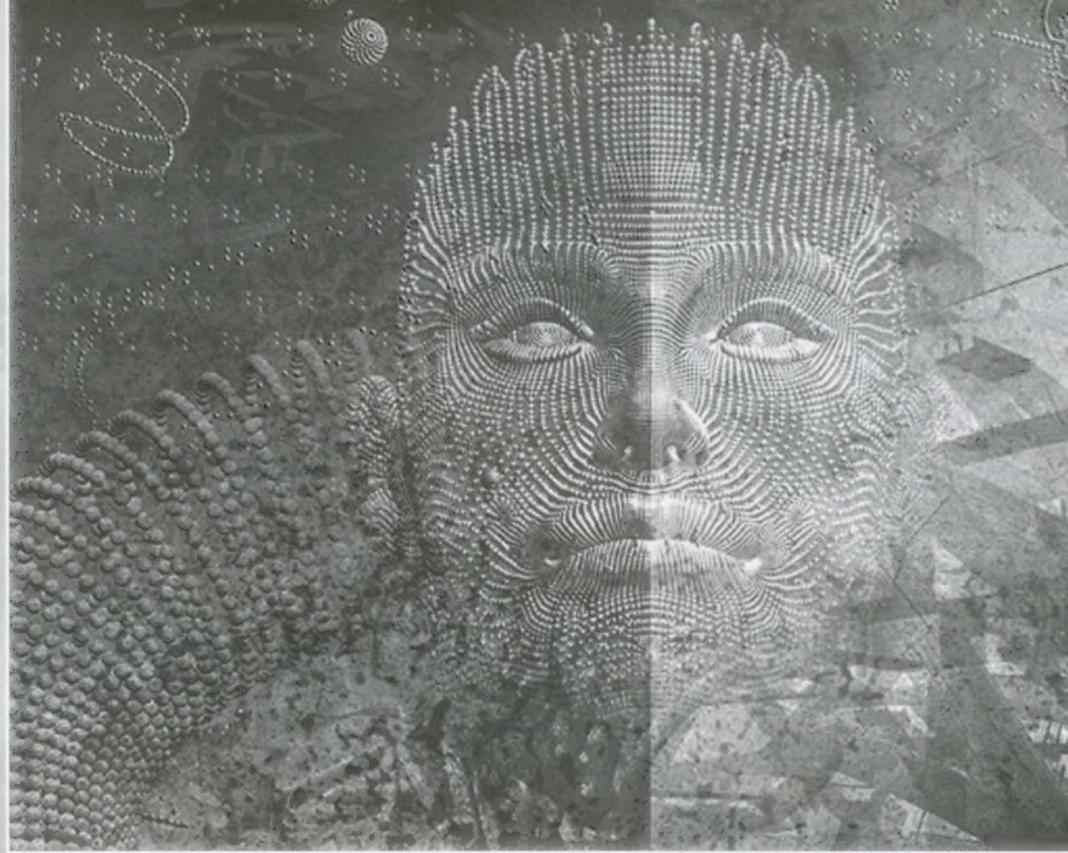
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ANCIENT ECHOES, DOMESTIC CHORES & THE PROCESS OF UNLEARNING

SUSANNA CLARKE & COLIN GREENLAND

MARTIN HUGHES ON VIDEOGAMES • NICK LOWE ON FILMS • DAVE LANGFORD • WORLDCON



NEW FICTION

6

DEE-DEE AND THE DUMPY DANCERS

Ian Watson & Mike Allen

22

THRESHOLD OF PERCEPTION

Scott Mackay

42

A WORLD OF HIS OWN

Christopher East

52

KIVAM

Dave Hoing

60

THE KANSAS JAYHAWK VS THE MIDWESTERN MONSTER SQUAD

Jeremiah Tolbert



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ARTISTS

1 & 22

Kenn Brown
www.kontent-online.com

8

SMS
 (no website)

42

Josh Finney & Kat Rocha
www.glitchwerk.com

52

David Senecal
www.quanproductions.com/
 dsenecal

60

Edward Noon
www.geocities.com/edwardnoon



FEATURES

4

INTERFACE

Cheryl Morgan on Worldcon
 Editorial

6

ANSIBLE LINK

David Langford's round-up of sf news

20

IF . . . THEN . . . ELSE

Martin Hughes on videogames

28

INTERLOCUTIONS

Book reviews by Rick Kleffel, Graham Sleight, Paul Kincaid, David Matheu, Sandy Auden, Gary Couzens, Colin Harvey, Lavie Tidhar, plus:
Rick Kleffel's Q&A with Ian R. MacLeod

36

INTERVIEW: SUSANNA CLARKE & COLIN GREENLAND

Conducted by Andy Hedgecock

48

MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe on films



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CHERYL MORGAN

INTERACTION: ONCE IN A DECADE

INTRODUCING THE WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION

Imagine, for a moment, that some major bookstore got five big name authors together for a day of signings and discussions. That might be worth seeing, right? But hey, if we are going to think of good ideas, why think small? Let's make it twenty authors, many of them flown in from America, and let's add that they so much enjoy mixing with us fans that several of them end up down the pub in the evening hanging out with us

before. But if you haven't been to a Worldcon before then you may be in for a surprise. Typically British conventions attract a few hundred people. Interaction is expected to draw between 4,000 and 5,000 people, many of them from North America and continental Europe, but also from far flung places like South Africa, Australia, Poland and Malaysia. We are expecting a sizeable contingent of Japanese as well, because Yokohama

themselves. There is plenty to do. Sure there will be authors doing signings and talking about their work. But there will be much more. There will be a dealers' room (books and much more) and an art show (yes, most of it will be for sale). There will be science talks, videos, gaming sessions and an exhibit hall. People will be talking about Mars, about Discworld, about Buffy, about Dr Who, about the latest movie releases, and about anime. Not for nothing is



NEIL GAIMAN (2002) AND ROBERT SAWYER (2003) WITH THEIR HUGOS FOR BEST NOVEL



and talking about their books. And just to show that we have no limits to our imagination, why stop at one day? Let's make it a five-day event with different authors every day.

One hundred or more authors at a five-day festival of science fiction and fantasy? Is this just wishful thinking? No, it is the World Science Fiction Convention. It happens every year, but it hasn't been in the UK since 1995. Worldcon, as it is generally known, returns to Glasgow this August. Each Worldcon also has an individual name, and the Glasgow event is called Interaction. It is an event that no British science fiction fan should miss.

Some of you, of course, will have been to science fiction conventions

will be hosting the Worldcon in 2007. To date Interaction has members from 34 different countries.

The good thing about an event of this size is that it generates its own momentum. Because so many people attend, everyone else thinks they need to go as well. Which is why you get so many authors. And why just about every big name editor from American publishing houses and magazines will also be there. If you are a budding writer wanting to sell your work into the US market, Worldcon is the place to be. It is the sf industry's premiere networking event.

But Worldcon is also a family affair. It is not the sort of convention where a small number of well-known guests are paid to come and sign pictures of

Worldcon known as the fifteen-ring circus of science fiction. All of fandom is there, and most of the industry as well.

Possibly the biggest event at Worldcon is the annual presentation of the Hugo Awards. And as a member of Interaction, you are automatically a member of the World Science Fiction Society and can vote on who wins this year. The voting process was already underway as this issue of *Interzone* went to the printers. The shortlists for the final ballot are due to be published at the end of March and may already be on the Interaction web site by the time you read this.

Big name British authors such as Iain Banks, China Miéville, Terry Pratchett and Ken MacLeod will have been

anxiously waiting to see if their latest books are on the Best Novel list. *Interzone* itself won a Hugo in 1995, and may win one again. And of course there is the incredible Dave Langford, who has won the Best Fanwriter category a record sixteen years on the trot. He is favourite to win again in Glasgow, but he's no longer winning easily. Hugo voting is often very close, and your vote could make the difference.

If a glittering award ceremony is not quite your cup of tea, there will be plenty of other things happening in the evenings. There will be a spectacular costume competition, a play, folk music concerts (bring your guitar, you are allowed to join in), game show style panels, and of course much sitting around in bars and parties socialising. If you are one of those people who enjoy staying up into the wee hours of the morning, you won't be alone at Interaction.

Of course a five-day event is somewhat expensive (see side bar). But at least you don't have to fly to Los Angeles (which is where Worldcon is next year) or Yokohama. This is a once-in-a-decade opportunity to get to a Worldcon cheaply. And Interaction has taken care to have a range of bargain-priced accommodation available in Glasgow if you can't afford one of the main convention hotels. If you live near Glasgow already, day memberships will be available. And if you can't attend, but want to vote in the Hugos, you can buy a 'supporting' membership.

For more information about the convention, and the latest news about what will be on offer, see the Interaction website:

www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk/

If you have any questions about the event, please drop us a line at:

[info@interaction.worldcon.org.uk.](mailto:info@interaction.worldcon.org.uk)

You can also ask questions, and talk to other members, at the convention LiveJournal:

http://inter_action.livejournal.com

Who will be there?

Interaction's Guests of Honour are: Christopher Priest, Robert Sheckley, Jane Yolen, Greg Pickersgill and Lars-Olov Strandberg.

In addition the following people have already agreed to participate in our programmed events:

Brian Aldiss, Ellen Asher, Stephen Baxter, Jonathan Clements, John Clute, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Ellen Datlow, Cory Doctorow, Scott Edelman, Esther Friesner, David Gerrold, Joe Haldeman, Peter Hamilton, Elizabeth Hand, David A. Hardy, Harry Harrison, John-Henri Holmberg, Geoffrey Landis, Miller Lau, Rebecca Moesta, Larry Niven, Sharyn November, Jody Lynn Nye, Terry Pratchett, Mike Resnick, Kim Stanley Robinson, Justina Robson, Frank Roger, Stanley Schmidt, Robert Silverberg, Charles Stross, Karen Traviss, Gordon Van Gelder, Liz Williams.

Please note that their participation is dependent on personal circumstances and some programme participants may have to cancel at the last minute.

Further programme participants are being added all the time. Check our website for the latest list.

How to join

Full Attending Membership is currently £110. This rate is good until 30th June. There is an installment plan available.

Supporting membership, which allows you to vote in the Hugos and obtain publications but does not include entry to the convention, is £30.

Single-day entry rates will be available, but the prices have not yet been announced.

For further details, including prices in US\$ and Euros, and reduced rates for children, please see:

www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk/joining.htm



Welcome to IZ 197. The reviews we've received for issues 194, 195 and 196 have been extremely positive on the whole, so I hope that you're enjoying the 'new' *Interzone* as much as the critics are. Don't forget that if you have access to the internet you can visit *Interzone's* discussion forum (www.ttapress.com/discus) and involve yourself in conversations about any aspect of the magazine – or any other subject. And your letters are always welcome. We should soon be announcing *Interzone's* annual readers' poll, and that would be the perfect opportunity to run some comments in print as well as on the website. Watch this space.

We're fielding the occasional query about *Interzone's* subscription procedure. As before, the number on your mailing label refers to the final issue of your subscription, and might well be highlighted if your subscription is due for renewal. But more importantly please always check the insert in the middle of the magazine. If the boxes there are blank, your subscription is fine. If you see a cross and an issue number you'll know that your subscription expires with either the current issue or the next issue. You can detach the form and send your subscription through the post, or you can subscribe (securely) next time you visit the website. *Interzone's* readership is increasing but this is not the trend elsewhere so we don't underestimate the value of prompt renewals!

Meanwhile, we will continue to fill lifetime subscriptions placed with the previous publisher. Some lifetimers, however, obviously feel that they've had their money's worth already so have chosen to subscribe anew with the new publishers. For this the new publishers are very grateful.

Next issue we have a new story by Dominic Green, and I'm delighted to be able to say that John Clute will be returning to *Interzone's* reviews pages.

Andy



FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE 1979, THERE WILL BE NO NEW TREK PRODUCTION IN THE PIPELINE

DAVID LANGFORD



ANSIBLE LINK

SF NEWS

As Some Of Us See Us. A positive article by Suzanne Ryan (*Boston Globe*, 14 Jan) about the new *Battlestar Galactica* ended by quoting a fan's all too familiar weasel words: 'It was incredibly written. The characters were really fully developed. It wasn't traditional science fiction.'

Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlist for 2004 novels: Ian McDonald, *River of Gods*; China Miéville, *Iron Council*; David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*; Richard Morgan, *Market Forces*; Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife*; Neal Stephenson, *The System of the World*. Sir Arthur himself enjoyed the dubious accolade of a Popbitch gossip site mention: 'Famous Sri Lanka

resident Arthur C. Clarke has survived the terrible floods. He was found in the sea clinging on to a buoy . . .' What can this possibly mean?

Douglas Adams is officially a heavenly body. The object provisionally coded 2001 DA42 – conveniently encapsulating his death date, initials, and Ultimate Answer – was confirmed in January as Asteroid Douglasadams.

Luck of the Draw. Diana Wynne Jones is ecstatic about the animated *Howl's Moving Castle*, flown over by Hayao Miyazaki himself for her private showing in Bristol. But Ursula Le Guin loathes the Sci Fi Channel travesty of *Earthsea*: 'It's full of scenes from the story, arranged differently, in an

entirely different plot, so that they make no sense . . . a generic McMagic movie with a meaningless plot based on sex and violence.'

Naked Came Atlanta. Possibly the most astonishing novel ever written, *Atlanta Nights* by 'Travis Tea' was created to test – preferably to destruction – PublishAmerica's claim to be not a vanity press but a 'traditional publisher' with editorial standards. James D. Macdonald explains: 'Thirty authors answered the call by banging out a chapter or two over a long weekend . . . without knowing what might be in other chapters, whether their chapter was first, last, or somewhere else in the narrative, what time of year it was, or much of

anything else. Any accidental literary competence was rapidly blue-penciled into oblivion. The result varied from unreadable to incoherent . . .

PublishAmerica bought the book.' On counsel's advice the hoax was revealed before signing the contract – whereupon PA seized the chance to back out. Instead *Atlanta Nights* appeared from Lulu.com, with profits to the SFWA emergency medical fund.

In Typo Veritas. ' . . . her public hair is as black as night, the starker possible contrast to the fiery crimson hair higher up.' (Robert Silverberg, *Roma Eterna*, 2003).

Roger Levy, author of *Reckless Sleep* and *Dark Heavens*, was the second of six victims of a lunatic's North London stabbing spree on 23 December. He's recovering well.

R.I.P. Kenneth Vye Bailey (1914–2005), UK sf poet and critic, died on 3 January aged 90. As K.V. Bailey he wrote many gently erudite reviews for *Foundation*, *The Third Alternative*,

work. • **Jack Kine** (1921–2005), special effects pioneer who co-founded the BBC Visual Effects Department in 1954, died on 14 January; he was 83. With Bernard Wilkie he worked on the 1954 BBC production of 1984 and created memorable monsters for *Quatermass II* (1955) and *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958–9). • **Gerald Pollinger**, UK literary agent who represented many sf authors during his more than 50 years with the Laurence Pollinger agency, died on 5 January. He was 79. • **Patsy Rowlands** (1934–2005), UK comic actress who had genre TV roles in *Raven* (1977) and Nigel Kneale's *Kinvig* (1981), died on 22 January aged 71. • **Sven Christer Swahn** (1933–2005), major Swedish sf author, critic, and translator of nearly 200 books, died on 15 January aged 71. • **W. Warren Wagar** (1932–2004), US academic and H.G. Wells scholar, died on 16 November.

Margaret Atwood, still wrestling with the fatal temptation to produce sf, has taken to outlining books she doesn't intend to write. Her 18

production in the pipeline.

Real Lit'ry Awards. *The US National Book Critics Circle* five-title shortlist includes two of genre interest, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*.

Stan Lee, co-creator of Spider-Man, was awarded 10% of Marvel Comics' profits from the spinoff films by a US district court on 19 January. His lawyer gloated: 'It could be tens of millions of dollars. That's no exaggeration.' Of course Marvel plans to appeal. Of course the other co-creator Steve Ditko gets nothing.

The Naked Lunch. John Ordover, former Pocket Books *Star Trek* novel editor who now runs Phobos, is interestingly exposed in *Time Out New York* for 6–12 January – which reveals, complete with nude group photo, his spare-time activity of running Clothing Optional Dinners for NYC naturists. 'The unofficial motto of the COD is "No Hot Soup".' Must be healthier than all those frowsty sf conventions . . .



URSULA LE GUIN LOATHES THE SCI FI CHANNEL TRAVESTY OF EARTHSEA

Vector, and other magazines. • **Walter Ernsting** (1920–2005), German author, editor and translator who as Clark Darlton co-founded the mighty Perry Rhodan shared world franchise, died on 15 January aged 84. • **Humphrey Carpenter** (1946–2005), UK biographer whose works included *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (1977) and *The Inklings* (1978), died on 4 January aged 58. • **Will Eisner** (1917–2005), legendary cartoonist who created, scripted and drew *The Spirit* – and much else – died on 3 January. • **Frank Kelly Freas** (1922–2005), one of the best-loved sf artists, died on 2 January aged 82. His long career began in 1950 and earned him ten Hugo awards as best artist from 1955 to 1976; in 2001 he received the Retro Hugo for 1950

December *Times* article gives rip-roaring scenarios for *Worm Zero* (in which, homaging Edgar Wallace's 'The Man Who Hated Earthworms', global disaster follows from worm extinction), *Beetleplunge* (in which, 'like lemmings', the world's beetles suicidally plunge) and *Spongedeath* – in which a rampant sea-sponge becomes The Blob That Ravaged Florida. Gosh!

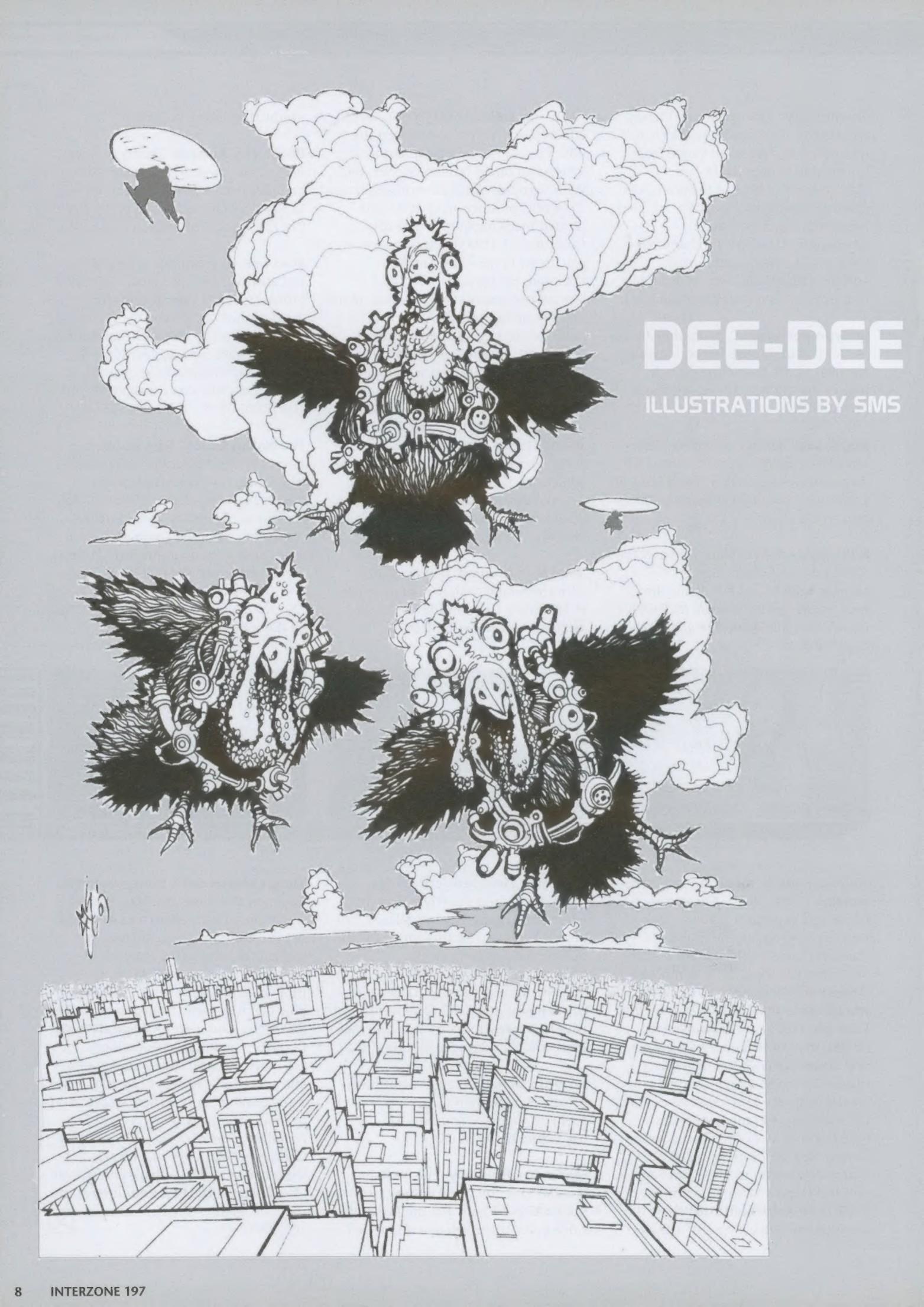
Quentin Blake, noted illustrator of (especially) children's books, was made a CBE in the New Year honours list – upgrading his 1988 OBE.

Media Moribundity. The 98th and last *Star Trek: Enterprise* episode airs in the USA on 13 May. For the first time since 1975, there will be no new *Trek*

Thog's Masterclass. Understatement Dept (or, Hot Soup at COD). 'Kassad was aware of the pain as a great sound beyond hearing, a huge, incessant foghorn of pain, as if thousands of untrained fingers were falling on thousands of keys playing a massive pipe organ of pain.' (Dan Simmons, *The Fall of Hyperion*, 1990) • **Magical Physics Dept (or, the Bounceless Bounce).**

'Satellites watched the residue of gas and energized particles strike the surface and rebound. There was no heat or momentum transfer.' (Peter F. Hamilton, *Pandora's Star*, 2004) • **Solid Geometry Dept.** 'The capsule was a truncated cylinder, perhaps four meters in diameter at the base and three at the top . . .' (Charles Stross, *Singularity Sky*, 2003)





DEE-DEE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SMS

IAN WATSON + MIKE ALLEN AND THE DUMPY DANCERS

Dee-Dee's daughter Meg, who was four, and Cheryl's Trisha, a year older, took a break from hanging out with Trisha's Granma to visit the 'big girls' in the kitchen of the double-wide.

"Who's Auntie Gravity?" lisped Meg, tugging a lock of that dark curly hair that favored her daddy, Dudley.

"Is there an Uncle Gravity too?" piped up Trisha whose luxuriant red hair was her mother's – and just as well, since Cheryl hardly wanted to be reminded of her ex all the time.

"You been seeing the turkeys on TV?" Dee-Dee asked Meg.

Meg nodded. "Yeah."

"This's got nothing to do with aunties and uncles," said Dee-Dee. "Gravity is, like, what holds you on the ground and makes things fall. So the opposite is called *anti-gravity*. Like, like," and she tapped her watch then circled her finger, "clockwise and *anticlockwise*."

"That's going backwards," protested Trisha. "Turkeys fly" – she waved chubby hands – "up and forwards."

"Well, like *antidote*."

"Wha's a dote?"

"You're in way over your head," Hilda Teague warned Dee-Dee. Hilda was not into flights of fancy. From the back bedroom came the chatter of TV. Granma was good about keeping out of the way when her daughter's friends, Doris Dudding – who everyone just called Dee-Dee – and Ruby Berger, and Hilda Teague, stopped in to make waffles and hold hen sessions.

"Maybe there's a cartoon on in Granma's room," suggested Cheryl. "Go see!"

The two girls scampered.

Any news item involving the portly, brown-feathered aliens in their equipment suits did look a bit like a cartoon, or at least like cartoon characters patched into real footage. Not that it was a laughing matter when muggers stole one of the aliens' flying suits a month ago. For whatever reason, this particular turkey had flown into a seedy Southside Chicago neighborhood. The Homeland Security agents couldn't keep up. Well, the alien only had its feathers ruffled, but after the thieves made off with the extraterrestrial flying suit the damn thing exploded, and took out half of a city block. Dozens of people died. No one messed with the turkeys after that.

"Tell you what caught *my* eye on TV last night," Dee-Dee said. "The news showed these ballet dancers in Greensboro. These women from the Ballet Theater had, like, rock climbing ropes hooked to their waists. They were hanging off this building and dancing on the wall in these tutus and fairy wings. And they were swinging and spinning and stretching their arms like birds with all this music blasting. They called it *aerial ballet*." Dee-Dee stretched her arms in imitation. "The news said they had radio headsets to tell these guys on the roof to pull the ropes up and down."

"I heard of that nonsense," said Hilda. "I think they did it at the Space Needle in Seattle. Pretty damn stupid, if you ask me."

"Listen," said Dee-Dee, "they got an arts grant to do that so-called nonsense. Y'know, money? And people were cheering. Look, we're all taking these stupid community college classes, hoping it's going to get us a new job –"

"Fat chance of that," from Hilda.

"And," Dee-Dee persevered, "we've all still got a year's Trade Act benefits coming. So we can afford to do something completely off the wall for fun."

"Off which wall?" Hilda asked suspiciously.

It had all started with a cheese hat. The four friends had been cutters at Texall for years – though Hilda had finally graduated to an office job – when the senior vice-president, Dan Dalhouse, took to wearing on his head a big wedge of yellow foam very suggestive of cheddar.

No, Dan hadn't lost his mind; nor was he declaring himself to be the big cheese of the Charles County, North Carolina textile industry. Dan was preparing his employees to cope with future shock by alluding to a certain best-selling self-help book about mice that hunt for cheese hidden in an ever-changing maze – in other words, "How to deal with change, and win!"

To tell the truth, the cover of the book in question depicted a cheese with holes in it, like Swiss, but if Dan had cut holes in his foam it could have looked, well, cheesy . . .

On a morning in late July, Dan finally addressed the assembled force of cutters and sewing-machine operators and pressers who for years had made sweat shirts and T-shirts, chatting fairly happily while they worked.

"J-B Embroidery and TrendWare gone down last month," Dan told them. "Appleby Knitted Goods last week. Last collar sewed, last lot dyed, last cuff inspected. A hundred textile mills shut down in just two years. We're dropping like flies. Y'all know why. Free trade laws. Cheap labor in Honduras. NAFTA. Us here at Texall, we're working at full capacity. Most of you, heck, you're putting in overtime. Makes no difference. Folks, ladies, we're closing."

He took off his hat to them.

"You're gonna have to follow the cheese, 'cause it ain't here no more."

Of course tens of thousands of people out of work meant no spare cash for that meal at a diner or the new second-hand car, so a whole lot of dominoes tumbled. This was Hiroshima for Charles County. It was melt-down. It was a tornado blowing through a trailer park.

And just at the time when those alien visitors were grabbing all the media attention! Compared with anti-gravity turkeys from Delta Pavonis, were CBS or NBC going to bother themselves with the woes of textile workers, waitresses, car mechanics?

Easy for Dan to say follow the cheese. Execs were used to moving. The workers of Charles County weren't. Community meant knowing who your friends were and never worrying about the future, and community was formed in the factory, with all that friendly gossiping glueing together women who wouldn't have said more than hello to each other at church. But not any more – life now meant lining up for benefits, chasing jobs even though you couldn't ever find squat, worrying about doctor bills, gawping hopelessly at TV back home. Guilt ate at people's hearts, as if they themselves were to blame for the county's woes. Thanks to petty theft, shoplifting, domestic violence and such, Charles County Jail almost burst at the seams, unlike Texall's formerly well-made T-shirts. Bankruptcies soared. Oodles of people defaulted on their child support payments.

"Look, it's just like the Enron managers getting buck naked for *Playgirl* magazine when they lost their jobs," said Cheryl. She always backed up Dee-Dee, as if Dee-Dee was a beloved big sister.

"Enron, you mean," Hilda corrected her. "You mean those Enron guys?"

"See, that's *initiative!* You don't just roll over and take it."

"I didn't know the photos showed them . . . Wait, what on Earth are you talking about? Accept *what?*" Poor Ruby had to accept quite a lot in life, what with her husband's drinking – not that Toby ever hit her but he sometimes said very cruel things. And her three boys were quite a handful.

"I don't see me as a stripper," Ruby said dolefully. "Anorexia clinic striptease maybe."

Ruby was scrawny, true. Bearing three kids hadn't fattened her up. Maybe if she didn't crop her blonde hair so short she wouldn't look so much older than her years.

"Now *you*, Cheryl," she went on, "that's another matter!"

Cheryl was definitely juicy. That gorgeous red hair of hers, too. A cutter since sweet seventeen, she'd turned plenty of heads at the textile plant. She'd charged into marriage with reckless exuberance, though why she chose to marry *that man* was a mystery. Result: after a few years of growing disenchantment, she and her toddler had moved in with Granma in the double-wide.

"And as for you, Dee-Dee, you dreamer . . ."

"Okay, so I'm a bit stocky."

"You ain't *fat*."

"I think the word you want is 'umpy'. So *what?*"

"Your Dudley would have a *fit*," Hilda put in, "if he could hear you talking about being a stripper. How he puts up with your crazy notions, Dee-Dee Dudding, I'll never know."

"Maybe because he loves me."

"Ouch." At forty, Hilda probably never would have a husband; a bit late for it now, to be realistic.

"Aw, I didn't mean that." Dee-Dee half-stood, as if to embrace Hilda, then stopped herself. "I mean, Dudley loves me just as I am. Anyway, I'm not talking about stripping! I'm talking about ballet up in the air that gets a highfalutin' arts grant. Okay, so I wasn't too hot at ballet when I was a kid, but when I saw what those sky-dancers were doing on TV, y'know, that was *easy* – and that crowd just loved it. It could have been *us* up there. I don't know where you got this stripping idea. I'm talking about putting a costume *on*."

Ruby chuckled. "Like a costume that shows off your thighs and ass like you're half naked anyway. People would laugh themselves sick. We'd look like chickens hung up on those wires. Chickens in tutus."

"Might just as well dress up like clowns," said Hilda, who maybe was still ticked off.

A smile spread across Dee-Dee's round face. "Hey," she said, "why don't we do just that?"

Dee-Dee's friends all looked at her thoughtfully; then Cheryl cheered.

That same evening Dudley's younger brother Zak dropped in on the Dudding's small red-brick ranch house for a beer. Just one beer, mind. Zak's body was something of a temple.

Nothing prissy about Zak, though. His temple invited the services of a succession of priestesses, who worshipped his muscles and his laid-back attitude, which might just be a result of the incense Dee-Dee knew damn well Zak inhaled in his little apartment. If the Eden Parks and Recreation Department ever caught wind of it, would he still be their part-time rock climbing instructor?

Maybe Zak wouldn't be their instructor for much longer anyway, now that factories sprawled empty all over town like beached whales with smoke-stacks. Eden looked like a massacre, and the city government was making up for millions in lost tax revenue by cutting employees loose.

"Furniture orders are way down." Dudley set down his can of Coors as if for emphasis. "There'll be more lay-offs soon."

Ten years older than Zak, and Dee-Dee for that matter, burly Dudley was shouldering a weight of responsibility with his wife on the federal dole. It never made him grumpy, though. Maybe he even thought that Dee-Dee was trying to cheer him up when she broke in with:

"Us girls had a *brilliant* idea this morning," and proceeded to explain, ending with, "Zak, you're gonna help us, right? You could go buy yourself some more old rope!"

Zak grinned. "Don't use no 'old' rope."

"I'm serious," Dee-Dee protested.

Dudley shook his head. "You think you're gonna get an arts grant to hang off buildings and romp around in clown outfits?" Still, it sure beat talking about lay-offs.

Beyond the home-made floral curtains, the setting sun glinted on the roof of Zak's beat-up Ford F-50 pickup, like a shiny patch on a bald man's head. Not a bit of industrial pollution in the air. Oh, if only there was some!

"Look," said Dee-Dee, "Hilda used to hang out at Eden High with *Claudea Mae Lockheart*."

"That woman's nuts." Dudley took a quick swig of his Coors, emptying the can. He didn't really want to discourage Dee-Dee.

"*Claudea Mae*'s also president of the Eden Arts Council."

"Hell," Dudley interrupted, "Keister Lockheart practically bought the Arts Council for her."

"Well, *good*. Suits me fine," said Dee-Dee. She couldn't imagine a worse God-given name than Keister, but life had definitely found ways to make it up to him. Lockheart had co-owned American Knitting before Texall took it over in '85, heaping more wealth upon him at a time when textiles still meant money. Prom Queen Claudea Mae was his trophy wife twenty years his junior, and he indulged her adoringly, catering to every whim.

"So if us girls could just get in a little practice at dangling first of all –"

"Won't work too well if you get vertigo," Zak said. "But I think I can talk my buddies into manning some tackle on a roof somewhere."

Concerned, Dudley said, "Please be careful, Dee-Dee." But he didn't have the heart to burst her bubble, so he went to get another beer.

Toby Berger opened his fourth beer left-handed, simultaneously holding it and hooking a fingernail under the ring-pull. Toby was getting better at being one-handed. It had been a couple of years now since that press at Container Plastics severed his right hand. Disability checks, sure, and Ruby's Trade Act money for a year longer, so the three boys and him and Ruby weren't starving – not yet – but the amputation turned Toby to drink even more than before. It hardly helped his temper staying bottled up with *her* all day long, so most days he'd walk to a bar, while away the hours, then turn on the TV as soon as he got back while sucking down a six-pack of Milwaukee's Best. At least the boys were outside on this fine evening, getting covered in mud, most likely.

"You wanna do *what*, Rube?"

He thought he hadn't heard right. Some talking head on TV was saying that NASA's Breakthrough Propulsion Physics project in Cleveland seemed no closer to figuring out how the turkeys flew themselves or their starship, which stood in a corn field in Iowa. Meantime big brown Tweetie-Pies were visiting Mount Rushmore, a circus in New Jersey, and the

Golden Gate Bridge. Maybe they thought bridges were funny 'cause the little peckers didn't need them. On screen, a turkey pointed a flightless wing with scaly finger-claws on the end of it at the Golden Gate, and squawked, but no subtitle.

Flipping channels to an Orioles game, Toby muted the sound.

"Do what now?"

He listened.

Ruby seemed absolutely fired up by this crackpot idea of Dee-Dee Dudding's.

"You'll look after the boys a few times?" she asked finally.

"You think I'm only good for a baby-sitter these days?"

"Audrey can help."

Maybe, if Ruby asked nicely. Audrey, Ruby's niece, felt sorry for her.

"Hell," Toby said, "you might just fall and break your neck and die. Too bad we lost our life insurance when those bastards at Texall gave your goddamn job to the Mexicans."

And he unmuted the TV.

From the parking lot, the empty Peebles Department Store building hadn't looked so tall. But now, that three story height seemed like one hell of a drop.

Zak and six of his twenty-something buddies were hooking ropes to stout eye-hooks bolted directly into a concrete partition on the roof. The long-abandoned building stood across from the central park, and as the city development office had long ago despaired of finding a business to fill it, Parks and Rec had lobbied city council to allow its use for rappelling instruction. It was intended as a temporary stopgap until the department could have a real climbing wall built – a prospect that seemed more unlikely with every new layoff announcement.

Clad in jeans and sweatshirts, Dee-Dee, Cheryl, and Ruby shifted awkwardly in harnesses that circled their waists and looped around their upper thighs. When Dee-Dee first saw the harnesses she'd been mortified. How on Earth would these monstrosities mix with a clown suit?

But if *ballet dancers* could wear these things and tutus too, surely she and her team of expert seamstresses were up to the challenge.

Zak's eyes glinted as if he were on the verge of a huge grin. "Before we try anything fancy," he said, "we need to get you used to walking on walls."

The men wound each rope, which looked to Dee-Dee to be slimmer than it should be, through a piece of metal called a figure-eight. These figure-eights were attached to the women's harnesses by a small metal loop called a carabiner, the pronunciation of which made Dee-Dee think of islands in the Gulf of Mexico.

Hilda eyed her three friends dubiously. Years ago, she had volunteered as a clown for Sunday school church events, which was why she had made that remark that got Dee-Dee so fired up, but no way would she take part in this foolishness.

Dee-Dee looked up at the gray afternoon sky. She was so nervous she feared she might be trembling; but there was no point in delaying. "Here goes," she said, "one big leap for . . ." For who? Charles County? Textile workers? Nutty women? A name would come.

She launched herself, leaning over the edge as Zak instructed, with her back to the ground. Then, with two of Zak's friends manning the rope, she began to walk backward down the sheer brick face, defying gravity.

Graciously, Claudea Mae Lockheart offered to mix Hilda and Dee-Dee a Cosmopolitan, or maybe a Red Lion or a Collins?

Dee-Dee shot an alarmed look at Hilda, who gave a tiny shrug. Back in the days when Dee-Dee still bar-hopped, she had occasionally indulged in Long Island Ice Teas. (Once, in a moment of giggly abandon while summering at Ocean Isle, she'd loudly ordered a Sex on the Beach.)

But nowadays her experience with cocktails tended exclusively toward excursions with her friends to El Ranchero on 25¢ margarita nights. And Hilda normally drank wine when she drank at all.

Dee-Dee chose the Red Lion because it had the most interesting name. Hilda declined.

As Claudea Mae fussed about at the liquor cabinet, Dee-Dee gawked at the Oriental rugs, the solid oak furniture, surreptitiously fondled the chair's leather upholstery. And she tried not to stare too long at the sculpture on the coffee table, which managed somehow to be both abstract and anatomically explicit. Half of Dee-Dee's house would fit in this room, which their host called the 'lounge' – a word extended into two syllables by her Southern Belle drawl.

The Lockhearts lived in the rolling hills to the south of Eden where all the old money had settled to build their mansions. Sun-dappled trees filled the view through the bay window; not a hint of the sooty, crumbling city. Parked in the circular driveway, Hilda's twenty-five year old Ford Grenada looked like so much scrap metal beside Claudea Mae's sparkling Subaru Outback.

And Claudea Mae herself made Dee-Dee feel a little like the Grenada. Though she was Hilda's age, she didn't look much older than Cheryl. Short and willowy, she'd kept her prom queen figure. By comparison Dee-Dee and Hilda were, well, dumpy.

But that outfit! White gloves, white jacket and a little white hat, like a blond Jackie Onassis impersonator. Even Dee-Dee had more sense than that.

"Keister's gone down to Florida for a trustee meeting," said Claudea Mae, bringing Dee-Dee her drink. It was *really* tart. "But you don't want to hear about that, it's boring. Now tell me this idea of yours."

Dee-Dee started explaining; the drink made the task easier. As she went on, Claudea started to smile and nod.

"Yes. Oh my yes." She waved north, in the direction of the city. "Anything to keep folks' spirits up and maybe bring a bit of attention to this town. Some *positive* media attention. I'll help you make this happen. I think you should get a medal."

"Well, not just yet," said Dee-Dee with a blush. Maybe Claudea Mae wasn't so bad after all. "We've got some practicing to do. But we got expert rock climbers helping us, and I've done some ballet."

"So what are you going to call your troupe?"

The words just plain popped into Dee-Dee's head.

"*The Dumpy Dancers.*"

Claudea giggled. "Oh I like it. I like that *a lot*."

"Ruby isn't exactly *umpy*," whispered Hilda.

"Ain't nothing," Dee-Dee whispered back, "that a cushion can't cure."

On a Saturday afternoon in the last week of July three-hundred-some people gathered in the alley behind the downtown market and squinted up at five stories of sheer brick wall. For their first real performance, the women and their attendant rope-handlers had laid claim to the back wall of the once-bustling Patriot Hotel; Claudea Mae's clout made it easy to obtain the proper permissions. The crowd had been drawn

by a story in the *Eden Messenger*, courtesy of Zak's buddy Jake who knew a friendly reporter, Seth Barnes.

Fact is, Barnes and his editor had been eager to cover something different from the continuous unraveling of Charles County: the ugly budget-slashing choice between shutting down school buildings or sacking teachers; how packed Chapter 7 bankruptcy trustee Ephraim Russell's biweekly hearings had become; the recent hike in water and sewer rates and two sewage treatment plants closing all the same. Only folks prospering these days were real estate agents – and that was because out-of-county investors were snatching up houses sold cheap to avoid foreclosure; usually the houses were rented out, right back to the unfortunate sellers.

Consequently the *Messenger* had already run a front page picture of the Dumpy Dancers practicing in their home-made clown suits. The headline accompanying the story read, **BIZARRE BALLERINAS TAKE TO THE SKY.**

All along the horizon, woolly Eden-bound clouds plumed up into the azure of the afternoon as if industry had taken a miraculous upturn. However, no rain was forecast until later. Sunlight heated the rooftop and all those upon it.

Hilda appraised her three friends, and nodded.

Dee-Dee wore a candy-stripe overall, frills at the neck and ankles and wrists, an enormous white parody of a tutu mushrooming from her waist. A great red grin enveloped her lips, her nose was bright blue, the rest of her face chalk-white. Big silvery butterfly wings stood out from her back above the tutu.

Ruby's blond crop had disappeared under a wig of bright tangled multicolored wool. A red blouse adorned with huge white polka-dots – down which flopped a lurid cravat – fitted into the cushion-concealing waistband of voluminous green trousers held up by purple suspenders. Each of her cheeks sported a big red polka-dot.

As for Cheryl, she had dyed her hair pink and frizzed it out into a huge halo. A spangled leotard enhanced her curvy figure. She too was wearing a vast mushroom of a tutu and wings.

"Test the mikes," said Zak, legal pad in hand, routines listed on the yellow sheets.

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall," said Dee-Dee.

"What a thing to say," protested Hilda.

"Look, it's just like actors saying 'Break a leg.'"

"You get that, Charlie?" And Charlie, Dee-Dee's rope-handler, gave Zak a thumb's-up.

Ruby simply said, "One two three." Was she feeling stressed? She'd hinted that Audrey was none too happy after three months helping out with the boys. It made Ruby's friends wonder if Toby had attempted a one-handed pass at the babysitter, kids in the house or no.

From Cheryl, with exuberance: "Three two one lift-off!" Hilda glanced over the parapet.

"We've got quite a crowd. Too bad we can't sell no tickets!"

This performance, and any future ones, had to be free. A condition of the funding from the Arts Council. Hilda was in charge of the Dumpy Dancers' finances, and in her opinion too much of the grant had already gone to post-rehearsal beers or Cokes for Zak and a dozen of his buddies.

"After today, maybe somebody could pass a hat around."

But who in that crowd would have cash to spare?

It looked like the three rope-handlers were puppeteers manipulating huge living marionettes, who were now limbering up. The early weeks of aches and pains were long over. The women's muscles had hardened to the labor of clowning in mid-air.

"Okay," Zak called out, "let's do it!"

Dudley stared upward with much trepidation. Sure, nothing went wrong during rehearsals, but the prospect of Dee-Dee hanging high overhead made his heart beat fast, especially with hundreds of folk watching.

Maybe it showed. Notebook and pen poised, gangly Seth Barnes asked him, "So Dudley, how do you feel about your wife playing Spider-Woman?" That photographer girl, Mary-ann, snapped a picture. She was holding a huge, newfangled digital camera in front of her face, with another smaller camera and several lenses in black cases dangling by straps from her shoulders, including a two-foot monster that had to be a giant telephoto lens. Dudley didn't see how she could walk upright.

"Seems to me," answered Dudley, "anyone doing something for Eden is a heroine." *Heroine* sounded a bit like Dee-Dee was doing drugs. "A hero," he amended quickly.

"Ab-solutely!" Claudea Mae Lockheart agreed. She had nattered on to Barnes about how the city needed a ray of sunshine in these dark economic times, and that was why she'd persuaded the Arts Council to sponsor the troupe. Except there wasn't much persuading to do; most of the Arts Council's current endowment came straight from her pocketbook. Or rather, her husband's wallet.

Dee-Dee had asked Dudley to be Claudea Mae's escort, much to his embarrassment. The nutty woman was dressed in an antebellum outfit, complete with hoop skirt, frilly hat and parasol.

The newshounds pulled away as the performance began. Dee-Dee was first over the top. Horizontal to the wall, she walked down with exaggeratedly mincing ballet steps as if picking her way through hot coals. The harness hooked behind her was invisible from the ground. Momentarily Dudley felt vertigo, as if the side of the old hotel was the real ground and it was himself who was tilted at a ninety degree angle.

The winged clown that was Dee-Dee paused, then she hoisted a leg and extended her arms forward and behind in a deliberately clumsy arabesque. This was raising a chuckle, but oops, she lost her balance. Folks gasped. But no, she hadn't lost it at all: Dee-Dee bounded away from the wall into mid-air and flapped her arms like a big cartoon birdy, or a hyperactive, spastic fairy.

Cheryl and Ruby also came over the top and dropped in jerky slow motion, miming and buffooning . . .

Charlie had loaned Hilda a pair of binoculars. As the hijinks went on, the crowd kept roaring applause without even waiting for a routine to end. But not only that — were raindrops falling down there, to be wiped from faces, when she felt none up here on the roof? — some people were actually *crying with laughter*. That hadn't happened in Eden in quite some time.

"Channel 2 was at today's show," Ruby told Toby and Audrey a week later. "So was Fox, and WXLU. There were TV cameras all over the place!"

"That's great." Audrey didn't sound as if she meant it.

"Does that mean you get paid something?" was Toby's comment.

"Of course not, it's for the news."

Toby's eyes narrowed. His wife talked back more and more these days. She was starting to forget her place, and he didn't like it. At this rate one of those rock-jocks might turn her head, get her to make a fool of herself. And that's all they'd do, 'cause they'd really want someone like Audrey, maybe not much face-wise, but young, with perky tits and a tight ass.

"Will you be on TV?" clamored eight-year-old Ben.



"Yeah," sneered Toby, "your Ma'll be famous in disguise."

"I got to be going." Audrey stuffed her textbooks and summer school homework into her bookbag.

Ruby followed Audrey out onto the driveway.

"It's been real good of you to help out, sweetheart. You didn't sound too happy just now."

Audrey whispered, "Look, Aunt Ruby, I can't stand the way he looks at me, 'specially when he comes back from the bar. I don't know how much longer I can take this."

"Has he said anything? Done anything?"

Audrey shook her head. "If he had two hands," she muttered.

Ruby drew herself up straight. "He has trouble minding the boys all by himself."

"Mostly doesn't try, that's why."

"Please don't stop coming. I'm gonna have a word with him."

The word, later that night, escalated into a horrible fight. During lulls in the bellowing and shouting, Ruby could hear her youngest son whimpering in the boys' bedroom. Several times, she thought Toby was actually going to hit her. Toby accused Ruby outright of fooling around with one of the rope-handlers – as if *she* were the one with the straying eye, not him.

If Toby was so worried she was cheating, why hadn't he even bothered to come along to the performances?

So what would *that* have shown him? he sneered, his mind beyond all reason.

Finally Toby stormed off to the living room and his cache of beer. She heard the TV switching channels as if he was searching for footage to incriminate her, oblivious to the fact that the news shows were long since over. She could only hope that one of her friends taped her TV debut. The next morning, she found Toby snoring on the couch, TV still on, the remains of a six-pack strewn beside him. Fortunately a hangover subdued his wrath to a surly murmur.

"I've been thinking," Hilda said. "How about if I dress up and goof around on the ground while you're performing? I could take donations, if anyone's got 'em to give . . . I mean, I just can't see myself doing what you guys do, but . . ."

"Feel a little left out?" asked Dee-Dee.

Ruby suggested, "Maybe you could try a bit of training just in case one of us does get hurt, either up there or someplace else."

This alerted Dee-Dee. "Ruby, do you think you could get hurt *some place else*?"

Ruby said nothing. Her expression was a mixture of apprehension and defiance.

Gently Dee-Dee asked her, "Is it Toby?"

Ruby sighed. "You could say so. I'm not letting him hold me back! I feel five years younger. That's the trouble. He's accusing me of fooling around."

"While you're hanging on a rope in front of three hundred people? What!"

"He's just resentful." Now Ruby sounded ready to forgive. "I think he's jealous, but not really because he thinks I'm having an affair. You know, him losing his hand, me suddenly making out like I'm an acrobat, getting in the news . . ."

Dee-Dee's mind went into overdrive.

"If Toby had a job . . . like, for his self-esteem. I wonder if Claudea Mae could talk to Keister. The man has his fingers in all sorts of pies. There must be something Toby can do."

"That's an awesome idea," agreed Cheryl.

"No, it ain't," Ruby said sadly. "Keister Lockheart fixes Toby

up with some job, like it's charity, Toby'll just get more suspicious – he'll think it's a plot to keep him out of the house so I can take one of these rock-jocks to bed."

Hilda spoke up. "I will do some training. I'm months behind you three, but we can't let this fall apart now. For Ruby's sake, or else Toby wins."

"Y'know," said Ruby, "I just love you all."

Dudley and Dee-Dee were sound asleep, but he roused as the cordless phone in the kitchen kept on ringing.

"Wha's time?" mumbled Dee-Dee.

Dudley always kept a flashlight on the bedside table. He shuffled out of bed.

"Midnight. I'll see who it is. Go back to sleep."

"Meg . . ."

"I won't wake her up. Damn phone will."

Dudley expected the phone to fall silent just as he reached it, but it didn't. It was Zak on the other end.

"Dudley, turn the TV on right now. Channel 33, E-Network. Don't ask, just do it."

Fumbling with the remote in the dark, Dudley only caught the tail end of the savage skit on *Are They For Real?* but the target was all too obvious.

Through the cruel magic of special effects, three obese actresses with grossly exaggerated hick accents and clown faces were dangling from what looked like bungee cords above a grungy city skyline, reciting: "They said we was down, but we's all up now! An artsy grant is great! Next we'll pretend we're big fat balloons, y'all watch us inflate!" And inflate they did, pretending to stuff food in their mouths, until they all popped, messily.

The skit was intercut with actual news footage of Dee-Dee and her friends performing. Dudley felt sick. All his pride over the enthusiastic coverage last week by the local TV stations drained away. Collapsing onto the loveseat, he stared numbly, phone still in hand.

What did this mean? Humiliation for Dee-Dee and her friends. And maybe worse. Dudley's sleep-fuddled mind imagined Citizens for Honest Government turning on the Dumpy Dancers, demanding at council meetings to know how much money was being wasted on these *clowns*. That group of rabble rousers banded together after the terrible commotion caused by Jeff Dekes, the Charles County administrator, who killed himself with a .45 handgun last October. Everyone thought the crumbling economy drove him to it, but the outpouring of grief turned to outrage when it was revealed he had embezzled almost a million dollars, and paid out some of it as hush money to two female employees he'd knocked up.

"Zak," Dudley asked, "how many people watch this show?"

The answer wasn't encouraging. When he heard Zak say, "Man, this is so cool," Dudley punched the TALK button and hung up. "Jackass," he told the silent receiver.

As Dudley sat there, *Are They For Real?* mopped the floor with some poor toddler prodigy whose ability to calculate *pi* endlessly and at high speed in his head had earned a talk show appearance. Maybe the real toddler could do other things, but the show must have bought up a day's entire output from a cream pie factory to make a mockery of a dwarf actor dressed in diapers who chanted numbers which rarely corresponded to the number of pies thrown his way.

And then came the turn of the United States government and the turkeys from Delta Pavonis.

Green-screened in front of a Mount Rushmore backdrop, a fellow wearing a latex President mask addressed the same

dwarf, now beaked and feathered and wattled as a turkey. The flying suit he wore was made of Slinkies and beer cans glued to what looked suspiciously like an inflatable sex doll, its arms wrapped around the phony bird's chest.

"Hey, how about taking Mount Rushmore *with you* as a souvenir of your time in the States? Show the folks back home our famous presidents Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson and, and . . ." Could the President be so stupid as to forget which of his predecessors were carved on the monument? ". . . and what's-his-name and the other guy."

"Gurble gurble," said the turkey.

"Hey, great! You just lend us that suit of yours, tell us how it works, we'll make one that'll *fit on to* Mount Rushmore." The faux-president licked his latex lips with a grotesque rubber tongue. Was he eyeing the flying suit with a bit too much lust for a mere greedy politician?

It was then that Dee-Dee came in, wearing a long T-shirt with a cartoon cat emblazoned on the front.

"Whatcha watching, Dudley? World blowing up?"

No, but your world might.

"Oh, this . . . crazy show." Dudley waved at the discarded phone handset. "Zak thought I might want to watch."

Dee-Dee peered at the President and the parody alien.

"Why would Zak get you out of bed to watch that?"

Her husband tousled his curly hair, which lately had thinned and grayed a little, and carefully began, "Oh, well, they were kinda poking fun of something else, too. It's probably not a big deal. You know how Zak is, he was probably toked-up or stoked-up or whatever. Well, he got all excited . . ."

Early next day, shortly after Dudley headed off to spend another day supervising the assembly line, Dee-Dee answered the phone expecting to hear an apologetic Zak.

But the man's voice was unfamiliar. He had a flat, mid-Western accent. "Is this Mrs Dudding of the Eden Dumpy Dancers?"

Dee-Dee's heart sank. It had to be some reporter, someone from the *national* media. Despite the spin that Dudley tried good-heartedly to put on his description of *Are They For Real?* she knew what had really happened.

But no! Her caller was with the government.

"I need to confirm a few things, Mrs Dudding."

Afterwards, Dee-Dee laughed until she cried. Then she cried until she laughed, so it seemed. All of which brought Meg out of her room, where she'd been playing with model horses.

"What's so funny, Mommy?"

"What's funny is the government just called here, and those turkeys, the ones from the stars," Dee-Dee was gasping, could hardly get it all out, "the turkeys want to see us perform, that's me, and Cheryl and Ruby, right here in Eden - "

Meg bubbled with questions such as "Who's the Government?" then, once she understood a bit better, "Will there be long cars with black windows?" until Dee-Dee had to shush her with a popsicle - so she could get on using the phone like there was no bill and no tomorrow.

"Toby, in three hours Dee-Dee's picking me up, 'cause of getting prepped and security."

"Damn woman, makin' all this trouble."

"We're gonna perform for the *aliens*. The government expects it. There's been all sorts of arrangements made."

"So they should pay you, God dammit, so you can get yourself a baby-sitter! I told the guys I'd see them at Top Dawg's

and that's where I'm going . . . to watch you foolin' around and actin' stupid" - Toby made this sound distinctly sinister - "if it is on TV, and I hope it ain't. I'm sure as hell not gonna let them think I'm pussy-whipped."

"Audrey *cannot* come here today. She's got pink-eye."

"Tough."

"I'll just have to take the boys along with me. Beg someone to help out when I get there. Hope that won't screw up my performance too much."

"You take our boys out of this house with you and you're like *walking*. As in *walking*."

"Maybe that's what I *should do!*" Yet where could she go, and how could she cope?

Toby came closer. "I heard this riddle the other day, they say it's from the Japs. What's the sound of one hand *slapping?*"

Oh God, don't let him mess her up.

Quietly, Ruby said, "Toby, I'm begging you."

"Gonna take a lot more than begging."

Ruby thought desperately.

"Okay," she said, "there is some money. Those government people call it 'disturbance compensation'. Three hundred bucks for each of us. Up front. Hilda's got it."

"You were hoping to squirrel that away? Make it part of your get-away fund? Give it to your hot rope-jock lover?"

"I was gonna put it in the common pot. We all were. But I'll give my share to you, Toby, if you'll stay here."

"I knew you were hiding something. Three hundred bucks'll buy a lot of beer. You got a deal."

So it was all a vicious sham. He'd been stringing her along, to torment her, get her all wound up, till he got what he wanted. Or else he really wanted to sabotage Ruby's moment of glory, but realized what a shit he'd look like if he went through with it and word got out.

Trouble was, there was no such thing as disturbance compensation. Ruby nodded in the direction of next door.

"Now if it's all right with you, I gotta ask Lucy real quick about the potluck this Sunday."

"Whatever."

Lucy Martinez was a fat, nosy gossip who Ruby usually tried her best to avoid.

"May I use your phone, Luce?"

"Yours not workin'?"

"Mm," said Ruby, with a noncommittal shake of her head. Of course, Lucy hung around, as if to count the words.

"Hilda," Ruby was soon whispering, "can you get three hundred dollars cash to Dee-Dee *right now?*"

Oh yes, there were limos, or at least cars with black windows. And TV trucks galore.

And the Mayor of Eden, Robinson Brewer. And what seemed to be the entire police department. And tall athletic guys in suits, with little wires spiralling from buds in their ears to disappear underneath their shirt collars, who were wearing dark sunglasses even though billows of clouds rolled unceasing across the sky. And at least half the city's population, including Keister Lockheart attending Claudea Mae, who was wearing a Flapper dress and stockings rolled down to her ankles.

Dee-Dee and her three friends, Hilda in clown gear, were down below on the temporary viewing stand, already costumed. Robinson Brewer had requested a round of flesh-pressing prior to today's event, so maybe in case something went wrong, there'd at least be some creditable TV footage and news photos of the Mayor.

Before she covered it in clown makeup, Ruby's face appeared haggard and gray. Toby had effectively stolen a major chunk of the remaining Arts Council grant, though Dee-Dee had to give Ruby credit for quick thinking. After procuring the bribe, Hilda had ranted angrily about the perils of marriage, how you never learned what the creep was really like until it was too late, which Cheryl had seconded with a resounding "Amen!" But Dee-Dee couldn't possibly agree; as she saw it, Dudley was everything a husband should be.

Dee-Dee had never seen Keister in person before, just the occasional mug shot in the *Messenger*. A lot of flesh, not all of it flab, was confined in a well-tailored grey suit in an imposing, impressive way. For some reason, probably known as Claudea, Keister wore a big Disney Dumbo tie fastened by a gold pin. Implying that Eden was having a festive day? Reflecting on the dumpiness of two of the airborne entertainers?

"Real pleased to finally meet y'all," Keister said grandly, nodding at the Mayor too. "I still can't believe how much my Claudea Mae's done with this little pet project." As if he was responsible for all of it – which, in a sense, he was. Yet he seemed to mean it kindly.

The Mayor nodded too, enthusiastically. He had already complimented the ladies on their enterprise and attire, although since the whole idea was to look silly, did he really need to praise the costumes quite so lavishly as if they were ex-textile workers' notion of fashion chic?

And then there was Midwestern Accent – Mr Spinelli – who had already paid a visit to the Dudding's ranch house, so Dee-Dee knew for a fact it was *Are They For Real?* that drew the aliens' attention to the Dumpy Dancers' act. Apparently a turkey back on the ship in Iowa trawled the wavebands. Keeping an eye on public opinion, as a precaution ever since the Chicago incident? Maybe. Spinelli, wired and suited, eschewed sunglasses as if to distinguish himself. Short, dark-skinned, he was clearly Italian in more than name. Though he spoke in flat broadcast English, if he'd suddenly shouted "Mama Mia!" in exasperation, Dee-Dee wouldn't have been a bit surprised.

Spinelli reminded Dee-Dee, "If our visitors do happen to want to meet you afterwards, not likely to happen but possible, remember what I told you . . ."

Sure. The turkeys apparently controlled their suits by voice command in their own language of gobbles. Their use of spoken English, which sounded like second-month immigrant, was eccentric, although they seemed to understand English perfectly well – almost as if some of the time they could hear what you were thinking. Maybe their quirky speech was deliberate so they didn't need to answer questions comprehensibly. Between the gobbles and the patches of pidgin English – Big Pigeon, more like – confusion could reign, and the wrong thing might be said, so she'd be best advised just to say, "Thank you," a lot, and "Have a good day."

As if she were a waitress, for Chrissake.

Don't bother smiling and try to avoid showing teeth – the turkeys might misread facial expressions and teeth might seem aggressive. Still, she was told, it was her patriotic duty to keep her ears peeled for anything that might be of significance to Uncle Sam.

And now three turkeys were approaching, airborne, flanked at a discreet distance by two black helicopters. The whole thing kinda felt like a surreal Thanksgiving.

"Time to start," said Spinelli.

Just as well that these days the elevator in the Patriot Hotel was unlikely to be encumbered by guests and their luggage.

Half way through the performance, one of the turkeys took off from the viewing stand and drifted upward slowly as if intent on a closer look. It rose past second-floor, past third-floor height.

Oh don't let it get in the way, Dee-Dee begged silently as it came closer.

Its two companions were ascending behind it.

Don't let them get in the way!

Dee-Dee was at fifth-floor height, pretending to be a Sugar Plum Fairy. Cheryl and Ruby were capering higher up.

And now the portly alien turkey was hovering alongside Dee-Dee. Close up, it smelled of turpentine and sage and chicory. Maybe some of the smell came from the flying suit, a sort of harness with bulges. Feathers, brown from a distance, were minutely speckled with gold. A large red left eye inspected her.

And then the creature reached out its wing and that abbreviated hand of scaly finger-claws toward Dee-Dee as if . . . as if inviting her to dance, would you believe?

Inviting her . . . to fly with it?

How could she fly anywhere partnered by an extraterrestrial turkey when she was dangling from a rope, ground-bound irrevocably by her own weight and the force of gravity?

Even so, and though that claw-thing looked so hard and harsh, Dee-Dee reached out her hand.

The alien gripped her gently, and came ever closer until it was right up against her. Disengaging the claw from her hand, the turkey maneuvered its wing around behind her back, for all the world as if it was courting her. She inhaled chicory and turpentine and sage.

All of a sudden Dee-Dee's weight vanished. She bobbed up, two, three inches.

A groping at her back between her tutu and her wings!

"No," she gasped, "don't, I'll fall."

"Noh-fall, fall-not," uttered the Deltan Pavonian turkey. The claw behind her clutched at her waist –

"Ouch!"

– then it must have shifted its grip to her harness, because she was rising up along with it, and you can bet she clung to its waist too, and as Dee-Dee craned her neck she glimpsed her rope with its figure-eight and carabiner swinging free like some upside-down Indian rope trick, and now she and the turkey were passing by Cheryl and Ruby, who just gawped, forgetting their routine, and she came level with the roof of the hotel, and a dozen astonished faces were all gawping at her – as she ascended higher, supported by alien turkey-power.

The turkey flew this way with Dee-Dee, and it flew that way, doing in mid-air what you might call a square-dance or maybe a cube-dance since the both of them rose and sank as well as shuttling to and fro. And the other two turkeys joined in, air-trotting this way and that.

It's the Turkey Trot, Dee-Dee thought crazily. Was this how aliens danced in the skies of their home planet?

Just as Dee-Dee was beginning to enjoy herself, her dancing partner turned its head – and promptly stuck its beak right into her ear.

"Oh!" she cried, and "Ooh!"

A thrumming vibration filled Dee-Dee's head.

Well, she couldn't exactly ever explain afterwards what happened, but by the time her portly partner landed her back down safely on the roof of the Patriot Hotel a couple of things were very clear in Dee-Dee's mind.

Turkeys, in their dreams, possessed ancestral memory, and while being cradled in mid-air Dee-Dee had shared a dream or two. Turkeys dreamed of a time long ago when they were gliding creatures who hauled themselves up trees and cliffs, kicking with one back leg at a time, the other foot impacted in the bark or rock like a set of pitons. They used dextrous claw-fingers at the tips of their wings to cling and guide themselves upward. Once they were high enough, they would launch themselves and glide, to catch the winged worms that were their favorite gobble.

Then the ocean sank a bit and into the enormous formerly-offshore island that was the turkeys' Eden came ground-predators with a taste for proto-turkey. Scrabbling aloft became vital, the faster the better.

After a long while the ocean rose again and something killed off all the ground-predators living on the big island – maybe they all ate one another.

Turkeys began to live on the ground again and boy did they put on weight! But they kept those rudimentary hands since those were kinda useful.

Always thereafter the obese turkeys dreamed of what it was once like to be light and agile and airborne. Intelligence and dexterity advanced. Turkeys yearned to regain the air, although no aerobics could slim a turkey back down to bantamweight. Their myth-figures were turkeys who could fly miraculously. Their heroes were inventors who built giant wings or springs to fit on to turkey feet or who used balloons to lift their bodies. All too often wings collapsed and springs broke ankles and balloons exploded. Such devices proved to be perilous impediments.

Yet turkeys had become very thoughtful birds. A great turkey thinker called Thoughts-Soar made a breakthrough in fundamental hyperdimensional vectors . . .

Remembering . . . of yearning, was in Dee-Dee's head. Honoring those who try. To be in the sky. In spite of dumpiness. Try buy secret. Nothing we want. Except see sights. Can photons be sold? Try beg secret. Begging is obble-ibble. Try steal suit. Suit goes whoomph. Today honor you. For gubble-ubble.

Whatever obble-ibble and gubble-ubble were, possibly on account of her false wings and her fluffed-out tutu and maybe also her blue nose it seemed that Dee-Dee and the Deltan Pavonian turkey were birds of a feather.

The other thing Dee-Dee found she knew was the idea that Thoughts-Soar had arrived at, or rather the practical application of that idea, namely how to build a personal anti-gravity flying package. Like peering down on some complicated 3-Dee maze that was burned into her brain.

Cannot lift big things. Ships or such. Equation missing. But a suit for you.

Well, Dee-Dee wasn't dense. She knew what a patent was. And surely Keister Lockheart knew *all* about patents or if he didn't he had lawyers.

Ruby and Cheryl and Zak were dying to hear all about her unexpected dance in the sky with an alien turkey, as was everyone else upon the hotel roof, but she hushed them and begged them to be patient – what if at this very moment a turkey in Oklahoma or Oregon was confiding the secret to somebody else? – and rushed to the elevator.

By the time Dee-Dee reached the street, still in her costume, the three turkeys were already flying off to some place else on their itinerary, escorted by the choppers.

Robinson Brewer was looking pleased with himself as Dee-Dee flounced past to much applause, and then past Mr Spinelli,

pretending not to notice his covert beckoning. A beaming Keister Lockheart actually bowed to Dee-Dee, or at least he bent himself. Hardly had he straightened than it must have looked as though Dee-Dee was kissing him upon the cheek, so close was she to his ear. Claudea Mae raised one eyebrow, then raised the other when Keister, suddenly pale, told Dee-Dee, "Don't say a word."

Of course, she had to say *something* to Spinelli, but she managed to come over as absolutely out of her head over her dance in the sky, yeah, just like some ditzy waitress whose diner had just been invaded by George Clooney, or Dale Earnhardt Jr.

From the start, the government tried to throw spanners in the works, especially after the turkey ship departed the Earth. Military and law enforcement bureaucrats made strenuous objections to Keister's statewide and worldwide patents in partnership with the Dumpy Dancers. (Just because the secret had been given to Dee-Dee didn't mean her friends wouldn't share.)

But Keister had his own political strings to pull, and within days North Carolina's governor had rallied to his standard, as had both of the state's high-profile Senators. It only took a couple of conference calls for them to realize that here, finally, was the putty to fill the job-hemorrhaging hole gouged in the state's economy by NAFTA.

And the President? Well, the unending national recession had dropped his approval ratings into the toilet, and he was desperate for some way to get skittish consumers to start blowing money again. After North Carolina's Senators arranged a quiet White House rendezvous, a mounting effort by Homeland Security to challenge Keister in court was abruptly nixed.

The FAA's protests about the nightmare of regulating individual anti-grav fliers were met with deaf ears by politicians who knew they'd never have to worry again about re-election . . .

And then there was public opinion to reckon with. Eventually *Time* magazine featured Dee-Dee on its cover, afloat in a prototype flying suit and her huge mushroom tutu. AMERICA AIRBORNE, was the legend. The stuff of legend indeed.

A billion dollar offer, too, from Detroit in cahoots with the oil industry to buy the patents, presumably to suppress them. On the other hand, battery manufacturers were rubbing their hands and drooling – the way the technology panned out, four AA-size batteries would run a flying suit for a week.

The command words couldn't be gobbledegook, had to be easy to learn, but impossible to confuse with words used in ordinary speech.

Hence, UX for *up*, and DUX for *down*, and LEX for *left* and RIX for *right*. A few of the control words were maybe a bit mischievous but Keister swore to reporters he was trying to "clean up America's potty mouth" – now certain words would have a whole new meaning. Such as FUX for *fast*, and SUX for *slow*. Televison evangelist Orville Taggart, one of the President's political allies, thunderously praised this "restoration to virtue of our corrupted language." No flier who'd been cut up by another would swear casually if it might send him speeding slap-bang into a building or alternatively slow him down. Society was gonna change for sure, in all sorts of ways.

Besides, no one could stop Keister and the Dumpy Dancers from setting up abroad instead if they chose to. Should Americans be deprived of personal flying gear if the Japanese or Koreans or French could fly like birds? (Although probably never the *North* Koreans.)

The opening in Eden four months after of the first anti-grav flying-suit factory was cause for a champagne celebration. So many people were there. Mayor Brewer. The editor of the *Messenger*. Even the county's development guru, Rick Talent, who maybe could have used a few tips from the Dumpy Dancers on how to reinvigorate Charles County. And out of town media, of course.

Dee-Dee kept feeling that she was missing someone, but who? It certainly wasn't Toby Berger! A newly-empowered Ruby had given Toby a choice between counseling and walking; he'd meekly chosen the first option. Yet despite the restrictions now firmly clamped on him as regards to drinking, he was trying to weasel his way in.

"Who's watching the boys?" Ruby demanded.

"Lucy Martinez."

"Toby, I'm paying for you to stay on the wagon and get your head straightened out, and you think you can hang out here where there's *champagne*? I told you, forget it. Get your ass home, *now*. And thank your lucky stars that I'm sticking with you for the boys' sake, 'cause I don't want them turning into no Kurt Cobains doing coke and wailing about their parents splitting up. But I could still change my mind. Don't you forget it."

Toby looked like a dog who'd been kicked.

"Aw Ruby, I just want a Coke." All that temper deflated by utterly changed circumstances, his woman on the verge of prosperity and in position to call all the shots.

Maybe he muttered under his breath as he departed, tail between his legs, but at least Toby's breath didn't smell of rancid Milwaukee's Best.

Just a little late, Cheryl turned up with a broadly-grinning Zak. They were arm in arm. Even though the Dumpy Dancers quit performing months ago due to all the business negotiations – not to mention oncoming winter weather – Zak had been seeing quite a bit of Cheryl lately.

As Zak took off to talk to Dudley, Cheryl winked at Dee-Dee. "Reckon there'll be enough champagne to spare for an addi-

tional toast, kinda personal one?"

"You and Zak?"

Cheryl beamed.

"I don't know as we'll exactly get married, considering last time, but he's so good with Trisha . . . and, Dee-Dee, get this – he's told me he'll give up the *incense* . . ."

On the Saturday morning a few days afterwards, the evening of Dudley's birthday, a huge package arrived at the Dudding house, delivered by FedEx, but addressed to Dee-Dee, not her husband.

Was it something from Keister, such as the first harness lovingly finished off by a former sweatshirt knitter now re-employed, or something from Claudea Mae such as an impossible hat or a cocktail mixer and bottles of bizarre liqueurs? Perhaps not whole-heartedly the Lockhearts were trying to persuade the Duddings to move to a mansion in the hills, but Dudley liked the idea of staying put for the moment, as did Dee-Dee, now that this was not an obligation but a choice.

Within, to her surprise, Dee-Dee found a round yellow cheese the size of a pumpkin pie. And a card, which read:

*Proud of you,
DD.*

Seemed like a goofy gift from herself to herself – had she been wandering around town in a trance? – but then she realized:

"It's from Dan Dalhouse!" Of course, he should have been at the champagne celebration.

She handed the card to Dudley to read.

"Dee-Dee Dudding," he said, "I'm proud of you too."

"Hey," said Dee-Dee, "why don't we use *this* for your birthday cake? Stick candles in it? Have a party?"

"A cheese as a cake?"

"Never heard of cheesecake? Besides, why should birthday cakes always be made out of cake?" The gleam of inspiration was in Dee-Dee's eye. "How about cakes of steak for people in Texas? Or, maybe . . . a *sashimi* cake for the Japanese, like, this great big slab of tuna?" Then she sighed. "I guess there's no time for that right now. We got a zillion flying suits to make."

Author of the Screen Story for Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, based on nine months spent eyeball to eyeball with Stanley Kubrick, Ian Watson (left) is no stranger to collaborations. Back in 1980 he and Michael Bishop wrote the first transatlantic sf novel collaboration, *Under Heaven's Bridge*, and lately he has co-authored poetry with Mike Allen – his own solo poetry being collected in *The Lexicographer's Love Song* (2001). Recently BenBella Books reissued Ian's Book of the River trilogy as an omnibus entitled *Yaleen*, and Immanion Press launched a British edition of his most recent novel *Mockymen*. His tenth story collection, *Butterflies of Memory*, will appear in Autumn 2005 from PS Publishing. In October he's chairing a two-day sf convention in Northampton run by the Northampton SF Writers Group (www.newcon3.co.uk). His website is at www.ianwatson.info

Mike Allen (right) lives in Roanoke, VA, with his wife Anita, two comical dogs and a demonic cat. He's had about 150 poems published, five of them co-written with Ian Watson; their latest poem, 'TimeFlood', just appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*. Mike's much rarer short stories have appeared or will appear in *Flesh & Blood*, *H.P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror* and *Weird Tales*. In his spare time, he's both editor of the poetry journal *Mythic Delirium* and president of the Science Fiction Poetry Association. By day he's a newspaper reporter; his favourite assignment to date remains his interview with the inventor of The World's Only Ass-Kicking Machine. His website is www.descentintolight.com





ALIEN SWARMS • TACTICAL SHOOTER DIRECTLY INFLUENCED BY THE ALIEN FILMS

MARTIN HUGHES



IF... THEN... ELSE

VIDEOGAMES

If one word could sum up the tail end of 2004, as far as computer and video gaming goes, it would be *disappointing*. Perhaps the most anticipated PC game of all time, *Half-life 2* (HL2), singularly failed to impress, whilst the Xbox's *HALO 2* offered little in the way of innovation. So are these terrible games? Well it really depends on your point of view.

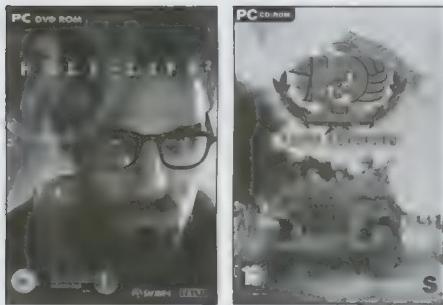
According to Valve, HL2's developer, they've been working on the sequel to the seminal and best-selling *Half-Life* for the last five years. Having played the game to its conclusion, however, I would be surprised if this was really the case. Apart from the updated graphics, very little seems to have changed within the game since the first instalment, and in many ways it's

inferior to its predecessor, especially in terms of re-play value, storyline and coherence. In short, the game feels as if it has been rushed, so much so in fact that had it been any other game in history, I doubt it would have sold many copies. And then there's *Steam*.

For those of you lucky enough not to have had *Steam* inflicted upon you, here's a quick resume: *Steam* is an online authorisation, registration and content delivery system, and is an integral part of the HL2 experience. In general, I would suggest that *Steam* itself is a good idea; it ensures that you always have the latest patches (updates, bug fixes) for the game, connects you to the 'Valve community' and should help to combat piracy – it's a modern way of distributing software, and with that I

have no issues. However, Valve's implementation is unnecessarily Orwellian.

No matter how you bought the game, whether you chose to buy it from your favourite store, or buy it online directly from Valve, *Steam* gets in the way. For a start, if you haven't got an Internet connection, you can forget about this game as it's impossible to play without one – not that the single player version requires an Internet connection, but without one *Steam* will refuse to let you play. Even if you have an Internet connection, it had better be Broadband, or you're more than likely to spend hours, if not days, watching a progress bar laboriously working its way from left to right. Perhaps the most worrying aspect of *Steam* is that Valve can arbitrarily, or so it would seem, cancel



It's a modern way of distributing software, and with that I have no issues. However, Valve's implementation is unnecessarily Orwellian



your account making your £40 investment in the game utterly redundant; if you couple this with the fact that in order for you to sell on your copy you have to pay *Valve* \$10 to have your *Steam* account reassigned, then I find very little to recommend about it.

Which is a shame. There are things about the package that are truly superb, not least *Valve's* update to the tactical, squad based online game: *Counter Strike*. But for me, at least, *Steam* has soured the whole experience, and I will think very carefully before buying another game from *Valve*.

And what of Microsoft's latest instalment in what may well henceforth be called the *HALO saga*? Again, it very much depends on your point of view, but if you were to rely on Microsoft's

hype generating machine then you'd be expecting this to be something a bit special. Whilst there have been a number of improvements to the game, for example the ability to duel wield weapons and to play as the alien 'bad guys' to name but two, the single player campaign mode is far too short, leaving the gamer wanting more.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *HALO 2* is Microsoft's concentration on multi-player gaming via its Xbox Live service. This is perhaps the most polished online gaming service I've ever tried, and *HALO 2* really excels in its implementation. There's plenty of scope for customising your character, interacting with other players, for reviewing your 'stats' and other useful features such as actually being able to talk to your teammates and opponents.

Where the online game falls down, as far as I'm concerned, is that *HALO* is far too slow a paced game to make for a really enjoyable online experience. Having played online PC games for many years, especially the *Unreal Tournament* series, wandering around with the plodding *Master Chief* in

search of someone to kill just doesn't seem like that much fun.

It's also worth bearing in mind that Xbox Live is a subscription service in addition to the cost of the game. Granted, you can play other games via Xbox Live but this is of little use to those who don't have an Internet connection or can't afford to pay for it.

For many of us the release of *Half-life 2* and *HALO 2* are indicative of the current state of the gaming industry – it's dominated by big businesses far more interested in profit margins than in risking a potential loss by offering any innovation. This ultimately leads to a chain of endless sequels – expect to see a *Half-Life 4* and a *HALO 6* – and a thoroughly despondent gaming community.

LATEST
RELEASES

Alien Swarm

 Black Cat Games (www.alienswarm.com), free

★★★☆☆

 The venerable *Unreal Tournament 2004* engine still has plenty of life in it. To prove it Black Cat games have created *Alien Swarm*, a top down squad-based tactical shooter directly influenced by the *Alien* films. Instantly addictive, this will certainly appeal to those who have fond memories of *Alien Breed* on the Amiga – and for everyone else buying a copy of *Unreal Tournament 2004* and downloading this is a must!

Half-Life 2

 Valve (www.steampowered.com), £24.99

★★★☆☆

 Ignoring the hype, *Half-Life 2* is actually quite a reasonable game – with a few flaws. The updated graphics and in-game physics in no way make up for the linear and tedious level design, or the apparent lack of story progression. On its own I wouldn't recommend this to anyone. However, the inclusion of *Counter Strike: Source* earns this title its three stars by adding an excellent team based Internet gaming experience.

Sabre Squadron

 Take2 Interactive (www.take2games.com), £19.99

★★★★★

 Sequels and expansion packs rarely seem to impress, but happily Take2 have bucked the trend with *Sabre Squadron*. Building on the team based concepts of *Hidden and Dangerous*, *Sabre Squadron* improves on the formula in almost every way. Whilst those who like their action a bit faster paced may balk at the strategic elements of this FPS, those who delight in intelligent level design and thoughtful gameplay should add this to their collection.

X

If you want to contribute reviews please contact
 Martin Hughes on martin.hughes@btinternet.com



ILLUSTRATED BY LEAH MCKEE

SCOTT MACKAY: THRESHOLD OF PERCEPTION

On a crisp March night in 1910, I parked my bicycle outside the Meudon Observatory and, arching my back to ease the strain of the ride up the hill, gazed to the northeast where Mars rose, bright and clear, in the faultless air above Paris. I glanced up at the observatory, and knew that within its vaulted dome I had at my disposal the largest telescope in the world, the Grand Lunette, a 33-inch refractor capable of producing the most minutely detailed views of the red planet. I looked forward with great anticipation to a night of protracted observation.

I entered the observatory through the south door and climbed the steps to the concierge's compartment. The concierge, Herbert, looked up from his newspaper, rose from his chair, and gave me the keys.

"An exemplary night for you, Monsieur Marcotte," he said.

I produced a bottle of wine for Herbert, a vintage my mother sent by the crate-load from Marseilles. "Was there any mail today? I'm expecting correspondence from Percival Lowell."

"I believe Monsieur Flammarion took some to the observatory earlier this afternoon."

"And is Monsieur Flammarion here?" I asked.

"No. He's busy getting ready for his tour of Italy. You might as well go through his private chambers. It'll save you the trip up the tower."

"Merci, Herbert."

I gave the wine to Herbert – a way to have his own exemplary evening – and passed through Camille Flammarion's private chambers to the observatory.

There she stood, the Grand Lunette, its miraculous eye lifted skyward, its focusing knobs beckoning to me, its lens angled majestically so that it peered out the open slit of the observatory dome. I was so eager to begin, I didn't bother taking off my hat. I didn't even remove my coat. I hurried directly to the telescope. I made the necessary adjustments. I sighted Mars. Then I put my eye to the eyepiece and observed that wondrous planet with the keenness of a schoolboy and the reverence of a true devotee. Yet in the end it was as a scientist I studied our great red neighbor. And, as a scientist, I again thought of the elaborate claims Percival Lowell had made about Mars.

No matter how hard I tried to believe in Lowell's famous but hotly contested canals, I simply couldn't see them. Were the canals there? No. A civilization building a worldwide system of water-bearing canals to save itself from the merciless advance

of the Martian desert seemed too grand an assertion on Lowell's part, especially when I couldn't see any evidence of the canals through my 33-inch refractor.

Mars appeared as a pale disk, with colours ranging from lemon to ocher, and showed immense detail, none remotely resembling artificial waterways. The surface held steadily. A maze of complex markings covered the southern part of Syrtis Major. Mare Tyrrhenum looked as spotted as a leopard's back. What Percival Lowell observed as a gridwork of organized canals, I perceived as a desert wilderness, with no sign of civilization at all.

I pulled my eye from the telescope and sighed. As a professional astronomer I knew I had a responsibility to tell the world, as I had done in two previous papers, that there were no artificially constructed waterways on Mars. But I hated so much to be at loggerheads with my good friend Percival, and I was reluctant to put pen to paper.

I glanced around the observatory. I heard footsteps. In a moment Herbert appeared with a glass of my mother's wine on a tray for me. "Ah . . . Herbert. You're always so thoughtful."

"I would never forget you, Monsieur Marcotte. I see you've already rolled up your sleeves."

"I have indeed." I took my glass of wine and looked through the open observatory dome. The red planet hovered just above the horizon, a bright speck to the naked eye. "Mars is particularly clear tonight."

"So I imagine you can see the canals," said Herbert.

I felt my lower jaw protrude a fraction as my brow settled. "No, Herbert, I don't think I will. I've never seen the canals. In fact, Monsieur Lowell and I are conducting a vigorous correspondence debating their very existence."

"Monsieur Lowell is a great man. A great American."

I felt the corners of my lips tighten. I put my wine down, and took off my hat and coat. "Oui, a great American. And a dear friend to both myself and Monsieur Flammarion. But I sometimes question his observations. First it was his canals on Mars – that was strange enough – but now he's written a paper about spoke-like markings on Venus." I took a sip of wine. "I sometimes wonder how such an intelligent man like Monsieur Lowell can let wishful thinking so easily distort his perception. How can he so readily fall sway to Schiaparelli's grand illusion?"

Herbert peered through the slit in the observatory dome. "To a man like myself, it's fun to believe in the canals. And I

pity those poor creatures living on Mars. Their whole planet is dying. Imagine! Having to build all those waterways just so they can stay alive! It's something I wouldn't like to see here on Earth. Though with so much water here, I wonder where it would all go."

Herbert left me to my work. I made a few sketches of Mars and wondered how Monsieur Lowell would react when I sent them by the next post. I grew suddenly eager – even anxious – to read his latest correspondence. I glanced around the observatory. I spied the pile of mail Monsieur Flammarion had brought up. I went to the table and, sifting through the various missives, found my much-awaited letter from the American astronomer, his response to my latest findings.

I tore open the letter and read.

I expected a vitriolic attack. But his remarks on the warrior planet were unexpectedly mild and surprisingly brief. "One needs a diaphragm, my dear Georges," he wrote, "usually from 12 to 16 inches if one is to catch the finest details. You'll have to stop your lens down. You'll never see the canals with a fully open refractor, especially one as large as the Grand Lunette." Throwaway remarks. Off-the-cuff remarks. What he seemed most concerned about was Halley's Comet. "I've been observing its approach with a new photographic technique my assistant, Mr Lampland, has devised."

He then wrote extensively of Monsieur Lampland's photographic technique, a process using various chemicals and fluids to enhance the light-gathering properties of photographic paper, especially during long exposures.

"Until late August," continued Monsieur Lowell, "I concurred with most other astronomers about the likely course of Halley's comet. But now I'm not so sure. The comet's orbit has grown aberrant. Lampland has photographically charted the comet's trajectory since May, and, using the stars of the Orion Constellation as guide-points, now detects a measurable distortion in the icy visitor's projected route." The American then made a grandiose and typical Lowellian claim. "I fear a direct strike against Earth is possible." I shook my head, saddened by this faulty conclusion. Why did he always come up with the most romantic and confabulist notions? "I plan to publicize my findings any way I can. To this end, I speak in London on April 2nd, and hope I can meet you there. As scientists, it's our job to convince the world of my findings any way we can." And why did Monsieur Lowell always have to be so evangelical about his suspect scientific discoveries? "I trust I can count on your support. Too often we're confronted with a skeptical world, and I fear that skepticism under such dire circumstances would be fatal."

I put the letter down. I sighed heavily. Much of the scientific world had already discounted Monsieur Lowell's theories about Mars. I couldn't help thinking of the story about the little boy who cried wolf. Who was going to believe this fantastical notion about Halley's Comet? Not only that, I was highly suspicious of Monsieur Lampland's new photographic technique. With such chemically sensitive paper, I feared an abundance of 'phantom' light – light that could mislead even the most astute observer.

I walked back to the Grand Lunette. I sat down and tilted the telescope away from Mars. I sighted the comet and put my eye to the eyepiece. There it was, Halley's Comet. It streaked through the sky, captured perfectly in the excellent refractor of the Grand Lunette, its tail stretching out for millions of miles, its frothy coma fizzing like an effervescent confection around its diamond-like core. I mentally charted its position against the stars of the Orion Constellation, then checked

my logbook. I shook my head. Exactly where it should be. Monsieur Lowell had once again fooled himself.

On the evening of April 2nd, 1910, the streets around the London Palladium were jammed with motorcars. People crowded the sidewalks trying to get in to see Percival Lowell. I pulled my collar around my ears and hurried down the alley to the stage door. I climbed the back steps and showed the custodian my special pass. Not for Lowell the discreet Langdon Lecture Hall at Victoria College, home of the British Astronomical Association. I was glad he was speaking at the Palladium. I would sooner him make a fool of himself before this fun-seeking rabble, not in front of the stodgy but respected members of the much-vaunted BAA.

I found my way to the green room where I was greeted by the aging American astronomer himself.

"Bonjour, Georges," he said, speaking French, shaking my hand vigorously. "I was afraid you weren't going to make it."

I was alarmed by the change I saw in Monsieur Lowell. He was pale, had dark rings under his eyes, and looked as if he hadn't slept in days. He was fifty-four, but tonight he looked much older. His suit, though impeccably tailored and of the highest quality, looked too big for him.

"Monsieur," I said, "I'm sorry, but traffic was bad. I had to leave my taxi at Charing Cross and walk the rest of the way."

"This infernal London," he said. "It gets busier every year." He arched his brow. "Have you been spreading word of my latest findings in Paris?"

I glanced away, where I saw a bouquet of yellow roses sitting on a table under a portrait of King Edward. "Monsieur, I . . . I've been following the path of the comet carefully since I received your letter in March, and I'm sorry to say I haven't detected any change. I've discreetly asked a few members of the Société de Astronomique to keep an eye on it, and we've taken a few of our own photographs, but we failed to spot the aberration you wrote of in your letter."

He broke into English. "Georges . . . please. You must understand Mr Lampland's new technique. More conventional exposures simply won't capture the shift in the comet's path. Without an extremely long exposure, your observations will be blinkered. I'm on a mission here, Georges, and you have to help me. We must convince the scientific world that I'm correct in my calculations. If we get enough of the professional community to join us, we might at least make some preliminary preparations against the collision."

My lips stiffened. I wondered how such a brilliant man could so misconstrue the observations of his own eyes. Even so, I felt I had to meet him at least half way, if only for the sake of our friendship. "I'll take additional exposures when I get back to Paris," I said. "But please realize that the members of the Société de Astronomique can easily dismiss any exposure I take. Photographic astronomy is a bit like . . . like cheating to them, Percival. Before I can persuade them of the evidence, I have to convince them that I'm playing a fair game."

The stage manager came for Monsieur Lowell a few minutes later. I followed them to the wings. I sat in an exclusive seating area backstage with a few special guests. The stage manager announced Monsieur Lowell. The astronomer gave me a sad grin as he stood by the curtain waiting to go on. He went on-stage to thunderous applause.

I peered out beyond the wings to the brightly lit stage. In this age, when popular lectures were all the rage, the American had drawn a good crowd. And because of the appearance of the Great Daylight Comet earlier in the year, a bright cousin

to Halley's, his topic was of particular interest. As the applause died down, Monsieur Lowell placed a few notes on the lectern. He cleared his throat.

He began by explaining Monsieur Lampland's new photographic technique, how it allowed him to chart Halley's Comet with an extensive index of open-exposure negatives heretofore unequalled in the annals of modern astronomy. Then, by reciting in his best oratorical style a history of Halley's Comet, he eased his way into the bad news.

"All was well until last September," he said. "That's when Mr Lampland and I discovered an unexpected deviation in the comet's projected orbit. We don't know why the comet has changed course. Maybe it was affected by Jupiter's immense gravitational pull. Or maybe an asteroid out near Mars gave it a good knock. Whatever the case, I'm afraid the comet's trajectory now looks ominous." The members of his audience contemplated Lowell somberly, fearfully. He looked at them as if they were all doomed. "We now know that Halley's Comet is heading directly toward Earth."

He let this pronouncement sink in. I felt acutely embarrassed for him. Alarmed murmuring swept through the theater. Why needlessly scare and panic these people? I wanted to go out there and tell them that Percival Lowell was wrong, that Lampland's photographic technique was far from perfect, that the light-blasted exposures were prone to misinterpretation, and that Monsieur Lowell had a history of making elaborate and grandiose claims. But I didn't want to publicly humiliate my good friend. So I sat there and listened, hoping he would finish his regrettable performance soon.

"A direct strike against Earth by Halley's Comet is bound to bring catastrophe on a global scale," he continued. "Widespread loss of life is inevitable. We might even face extinction, like our unfortunate Martian neighbors are. But if we begin making preparations now, I believe a sizable portion of humanity can survive. I think it's possible that mankind can come through this, if we all pull together and act now."

Here it was again, the grand Lowellian theme. Just as civilization on Mars was doomed, so now civilization on Earth was doomed. A tragic tale destined to stir the imaginations of these clerks and dockworkers in their Sunday best. As fantastical and unlikely a story as a fiction of scientific romance. I sank more deeply into my seat, desperately wanting to support Monsieur Lowell in his extravagant assertions, but fearing that by this time next year, after Halley's Comet had safely passed, he would once and for all be dismissed as a dilettante and charlatan.

On April 10th, Percival and I sat at the table next to the Grand Lunette looking at his photographs of the comet for the hundredth time. The photographs were small, barely six centimeters square, and had to be viewed with a magnifying glass. Camille Flammarion, head of the Société de Astronomique, was now down in Italy on his long-awaited sabbatical, and had offered Monsieur Lowell the use of his private chambers in the Meudon Observatory, as well as unlimited access to the Grand Lunette.

"Georges, if you would just give me your support on this," he said. "We could take the photographs to the Société tomorrow, and with your backing I'm sure we could make a case for my findings."

I again felt sorry for Monsieur Lowell. "Percival, these photographs are misleading. I'm not sure you've properly identified the comet in at least half of them. Monsieur Lampland's exposures aren't detailed enough to make any but the most

rudimentary guesses about the comet's trajectory."

"I assure you, Georges, the comet has been identified properly in every frame. If only I'd brought the negatives. Maybe if you had the opportunity to compare these exposures to the negatives, you'd quickly see that I'm right. What must I do to convince you? Can you not understand what's at stake here?"

I shook my head. "I don't know, monsieur. These photographs are no bigger than postage stamps. One might as well look at tarot cards. Monsieur Lampland's chemicals are too sensitive. I see nothing but a rat's nest of light."

Percival shook his head, bewildered by my skepticism. Didn't he understand that science was science? One couldn't make outlandish claims without the necessary evidence to support them. I lamented all the scare-mongering that was going on with this particular comet. First it was Camille Flammarion and his claim that cyanogen gas from the comet's tail would impregnate the Earth's atmosphere and wipe out all life. Now Lowell insisted the comet would actually strike Earth. And no reasonable proof for either claim! I watched him scrutinize the photographs one more time through the magnifying glass. His belief was fervent. I pitied him. He had reached that threshold of perception where accuracy and objectivity no longer mattered.

"If only Monsieur Lampland were here," he said at last, putting down his magnifying glass.

He looked downcast, worried sick. I wanted to cheer him up. "Monsieur, let's take another look at the comet through the refractor. Maybe tonight we'll find something suggestive of your conclusions."

But he was too disheartened to make use of the telescope tonight.

"You go ahead, Georges," he said. "Every time I look at that comet I feel like I'm looking at a loaded gun. No one believes me, but I know I'm right."

"It's not that we don't believe you, monsieur. It's just that we need proof."

I got up and searched for that proof through the great 33-inch refracting mirror of the Grand Lunette. As seen through the telescope, the comet was now two-thirds the size of the moon. It spewed off gases like an overheated steam engine, nothing like the restful pink orb of Mars I liked to watch so much. The sublimation of ice into gas was spectacular. Here was the age-old portent. I felt mesmerized by the apparition, so mesmerized, in fact, that I at first didn't immediately observe the comet's unexpected change of position. A slight alteration, yes, just by a degree or two, but enough to tell me that it wasn't where it should be, that it had moved to the left of the Orion Constellation by a measurable if minute distance, and that maybe Monsieur Lowell might be right about the direct strike after all.

Then I heard a loud crash behind me. I whirled around and saw Percival lying on the floor. The magnifying glass clattered to the tiles beside him, remaining intact. I hurried over and knelt next to the stricken man.

"Percival!" I cried.

He stared up at me sightlessly, the left side of his face drooping in a ghastly fashion. I knew a stroke when I saw one. He lifted his right hand and clawed the air, his thumb and his baby finger twitching toward each other while his middle digits splayed in a spasmodic fashion. It was as if he meant to pluck the comet from the sky.

I stood up and turned to the door. "Herbert, come quickly! Monsieur Lowell has suffered a stroke! We must fetch the doctor!"

I took my latest findings to the Société de Astronomique a few days later. The staid and mustachioed president of our Société, Dr Maurice Durey, studied my newest exposures with growing concern. A line appeared on his forehead, and he looked at his colleagues. He went through my calculations line by line, then did some of his own mathematical jottings on a piece of scrap paper. Finally he sat back.

"It looks as if the comet's orbit deviates from what we originally anticipated," he admitted, "but I still don't see proof that it will intersect with Earth."

I pulled out Monsieur Lowell's photographs and calculations. "Yes, but if you take my observations together with Monsieur Lowell's, you realize that he might be right. I know he's been guilty of some elaborate claims in the past – the canals on Mars, and now these spokes on Venus – but these calculations look ominous to me, and I think we should take them into serious consideration."

Dr Durey peered at Monsieur Lowell's calculations, then went through Monsieur Lampland's light-saturated exposures one by one. He then showed everything to his two colleagues, Drs Covillaud and Lenéru. They studied the photographs and examined the calculations with exhaustive thoroughness. Dr Lenéru finally raised his left eyebrow and pointed to a particularly worrisome equation regarding the comet's projected perihelion.

"I think Monsieur Lowell might have something here," he said.

For the next hour, the four of us went through the equations again and again.

By the end of it all, Dr Durey's face had turned white. He looked up at me, and I had the impression that he had aged a number of years in the space of a few moments. He lifted the calculations again, placed his monocle in his left eye, studied them once more, and all the while I couldn't help noticing how the paper shook in his hands, like a leaf caught in the repetitive eddy of a summer breeze, the corner of the twenty-pound bond quivering, beating with the speed of a bird's heart.

"Perhaps there's some substance to these calculations after all," he said, his voice calm, but somehow smaller.

On the evening of May 12th, 1910, I pushed Percival in a wheelchair around the grounds of the Meudon Observatory. He stared at the comet, which was now easily visible to the naked eye.

"I want to go home," said Monsieur Lowell.

His speech was badly slurred and it took me several moments to make out what he had said. "The doctor says you're too ill for the voyage, Percival. You'll have to recuperate in Paris before you can risk the Atlantic." I gestured toward the comet. "And in any case, the government has restricted travel for the time being."

Monsieur Lowell's face sagged.

Far in the distance, I saw Paris: the Seine snaking past the Louvre and the Tuileries, winding around the Eiffel Tower, curving south through the Arrondisements of Passy and Vaugirard. The sun was setting, and a lavender mist cloaked the city.

The comet hovered high in the western sky. I held two telegrams in my hand. One was from Camille Flammarion. He was postponing his return to Paris, was going to stay in his chalet in the Italian Alps, on high ground. What better place to weather the strike? The other telegram was from Lowell's family in Boston. They were leaving Boston. They would take refuge in Flagstaff.

I was about to tell Monsieur Lowell all this when the sky lit up with an eye-smarting flash. Here it was, I thought, the age-old portent, blanching the pastel air of Paris with its malignant glare, looking as if it were heading straight for the North Atlantic. I glanced at Lowell. His face was alabaster-white in the flash of the comet. But he was smiling. Why would he smile like that? Here was the day of our doom. The light faded as the comet dipped below the horizon. What possible joy could he take in something so horrible?

Then I understood . . .

"You were right after all," I said, feeling irrationally resentful toward the astronomer. "But your vindication must be bitter, Percival, mustn't it?"

A faint rumble swept through Paris.

He looked at me, his white hair wild around his bald pate, his blue eyes twinkling. "Bitter indeed, Georges."

Seven weeks after the end of the world, as I rode my bicycle up the hill to the Meudon Observatory, I felt within my breast the growing desperation of an encroaching hopelessness. I had one of my mother's wine crates fixed to my back fender, and it was full of canned goods I had scavenged from a number of abandoned stores in Paris. The road had turned to mud, and the rain still came down, a biblical forty days of it so far, with no sign of it letting up. As hard as I pedaled, the mud finally overwhelmed my tires, and I had to stop, get off, and push my bicycle up to the parkland surrounding the observatory.

The round reflecting pool in front of the observatory had filled to overflowing and now spilled out onto the lawn. The observatory pond was flooded. A number of motorcars were parked around Meudon, the vehicles of survivors who had sought refuge on the observatory's higher ground. A few cows and goats grazed miserably in the pouring rain.

I reached a tree near the reflecting pool and took shelter. The end of June, and this should have been a pretty time in Paris. But Paris was dark below me. The sinewy stripe of the Seine had disappeared beneath the grey-green flood of this modern-day Armageddon, and the smell of rotting bodies reached my nostrils, even all the way up here, at the top of the Avenue du Château.

I felt as if I had outlived my usefulness. Who needed astronomers anymore, when the sky was always cloudy. I was like the Meudon Observatory itself, a rococo relic from the past – with Paris steadily encroaching from the north, bringing with it a sea of light, the neo-classical Observatory was now only of secondary importance to the astronomy world. Yet I had to remember, it was here at Meudon that we had first confirmed the current Lowellian catastrophe. For that reason, Meudon would always remain in the history books.

I pushed my bicycle across the grounds and entered the observatory.

I found Percival asleep in his chair beside the Grand Lunette, facing the windows overlooking Paris. I walked to the windows and gazed at the capital once more. I saw the Eiffel Tower dominating at its center. So many buildings had been toppled in the initial riverine surge. The city was no longer a city of light, but a city of darkness.

Then I saw a brief spark in the vicinity of Jardin du Luxembourg. Then another, and another . . . till the spark flickered into life and glowed steadily, a sharp and caustic blue. I walked to the office adjoining the main observatory, lifted my 3-inch refractor, and proceeded out to the terrace. I lifted the refractor to my eye and peered toward Jardin du Luxembourg.

My observations were exact and unmistakable. French troops blow-torched their way through twisted debris, while others cleared the rubble away. Still others erected what looked like the beginning of a dike along Rue de Vaugirard, building a bulwark against the flood. My encroaching hopelessness deepened.

I couldn't help thinking of the doomed Martians building their canals.

May 12th, 1911. I write in my journal on the anniversary of the comet strike. Exactly one year has passed. The rain stopped briefly one day last week. Percival sleeps in a cot beside me. I'm afraid he's grown much weaker. I fear he might die soon. We have many survivors living in the observatory with us. Much of Paris is still under water. A hundred families are living here now. I am the nominal mayor of this small community.

So far we've been lucky. We've scavenged enough food to survive. But conditions are deteriorating. There were no crops last year. There's been nothing to feed livestock. To make matters worse, Kaiser Wilhelm has finally chosen his moment. His troops invaded Belgium last Monday and are expected to enter France any day now. I don't know how much longer we can hang on. I rue the day Percival ever turned out to be right. I wish the comet strike was nothing but a mirage, like all those canals on Mars.

I put my pen down and turned to Percival. He coughed in his sleep. He woke up, opened his eyes, and looked at me.

"Brandy," he whispered.

"Percival, the brandy is gone. We have one crate of my mother's wine left, that's it."

"Then give me some of that."

I got up from the table, walked to the desk, and poured wine for Monsieur Lowell. He couldn't go home. Not now, not ever. There were no ships crossing the Atlantic these days.

The rain rattled like a thousand snare drums against the observatory dome. The dome was closed and the Grand Lunette sat unused, covered with cobwebs. With the sky overcast all the time, there was never anything to look at anyway.

Percival propped himself up on his elbow. He looked steadier than usual. This was our private chamber now. We lived here, the two of us, subsisting on canned Spam and the mushrooms I grew in the corner. I gave Percival his glass of wine. He drank it quickly and it seemed to restore him greatly.

"Help me to my wheelchair," he said. "I want to see how the troops are making out."

"Percival," I said, "our troops have been redeployed. Kaiser Wilhelm is making a nuisance of himself in Belgium."

"Let's take a look anyway," he said.

I helped him out of his cot and got him into his wheelchair. I pushed him to the office, and we looked out the window. The trees outside, having lost their leaves in autumn, had failed to regrow them in spring; with the world darkened by a globe-spanning blanket of cloud, photosynthesis had all but stopped. We planned to chop the trees down soon for firewood.

We saw the famous buildings of Paris sticking out of the water – the Sorbonne, Notre Dame, the Hôtel des Invalides – all under the grey-green flood of the comet. To the west we saw the great earthworks, a massive dike system the French Army had been constructing all year, now stretching through the Arrondissements of Vaugirard, Passy, Batignolles, La Chapelle, and La Villette. The artificial construction seemed to amaze Percival every time he saw it.

"Some day, when all these clouds clear . . ." But he lost his train of thought as he gazed at the dike system through his spectacles. He swallowed, squeezing hard, as if he had a sore spot in his throat. "Some day . . . when we finally have blue

sky again . . . the Martians will look down on us through their telescopes . . . and they'll see that they're not alone. They'll see our dikes . . . and they'll know that we, too, are having difficulties. They'll understand that they finally have somebody they can share their suffering with."

The rain lessened, and with it, came relative quiet. Percival Lowell's Martians. I remembered his writings. Three times the size of a human being and fifty times as strong. Easily able to build a vast network of canals. Possessed of inventions we couldn't even begin to imagine, inventions that made our present-day electrophones and kinetoscopes look like the clumsy contrivances of cavemen. Was he right about the Martians? Certainly he'd been right about the comet. But could I believe his grander notions about an alien civilization? When it came right down to it, I didn't know what to believe anymore.

I took a deep breath and glanced up at the dust-covered Grand Lunette. Why not believe in Lowell's sentient civilization on Mars? There was no proof to the contrary. Outside, the rain stopped. It was easy to believe anything now. Easy to believe that Kaiser Wilhelm would wage war in the sea of mud that was now Europe. Easy to believe that Halley's Comet could strike the North Atlantic and cause world-wide destruction. Even easy to believe in Lowell's grand and dramatic Martian canals, which I had stubbornly refuted with all my scientific might for the last ten years.

Later that night, when Percival was sleeping, I went to the office, looked out the window, and to my great surprise saw a break in the clouds, miles wide, showing the pale stars of the evening above. And lo and behold, there was Mars! I quickly seized my 3-inch refractor and gazed at noble Ares for the first time since 1910. A spectacular image, reassuring, a beacon of light and wonder. And do you know, for just a moment, I saw them – they were there, unmistakable, steady in my lens, the canals of Mars!

I saw what Monsieur Lowell meant by their wonderful mathematical fitness. I saw what he meant by their overwhelming exactitude. And yes, I finally believed in them, these great inland waterways, and not only in the waterways, but in Monsieur Lowell's noble and wondrous Martians as well. Accuracy and objectivity no longer mattered. Not in this dark time. What mattered was belief.

I heard footsteps behind me. I turned. It was Herbert, formerly the concierge, now part of our little community here in the Meudon Observatory, bringing one of the last glasses of wine to me on a tray.

"Finally a clear night for you, Monsieur Marcotte."

I nodded. I took the wine. "And Mars is resplendent, Herbert."

"An extra treat for you, then, monsieur."

"And do you know, I think I finally might believe in the canals after all. I think they're up there."

"Of course they're up there, monsieur. I never doubted it for a minute."

I put my telescope down and looked at Mars with the naked eye. What mattered, I thought, was faith. The warrior planet shone like a message of perseverance.

"If they can do it, Herbert," I said, "so can we."

Scott has published over forty short stories in sf and mystery magazines. He's the author of eight published novels, including sf novels *Outpost* (Tor, 1998), *The Meek* (Roc, 2001), and *Orbis* (Roc, 2002). *Omnifix*, his newest sf novel, was published by Roc in February 2004, and was listed at Number 6 on the Locus Bestsellers List in May 2004. Prometheus Books will publish his next sf novel, *Tides*, under the Pyrimprint, later this year. He lives in Toronto with his wife and two children.

VARIOUS AUTHORS

INTERLOCUTIONS

BOOK REVIEWS



RICK KLEFFEL

BLACK BRILLION Matthew Hughes' **Black Brillion** starts as a pleasantly unassuming far-future police procedural. It doesn't take long, however, for Hughes' skills as a writer to turn his clever premise of cons, cops, a mysterious disease and a miracle cure in a setting quite reminiscent of Jack Vance's *Dying Earth* into a profoundly enjoyable and thought-provoking adventure. *Black Brillion* indeed performs miracles.

Matthew**Hughes**

Tor hb, 272pp,

\$23.95

From the beginning it's apparent that Hughes is a superior prose stylist. His droll, understated style is easy to read yet rich and rewarding. There's an undercurrent of humour in every sentence, but Hughes writes with a literary sensibility that brings a feeling of depth and quality. *Black Brillion* offers a wonderful reading experience, due largely to Hughes' ability to create complex and entertaining characters. Harkless, as one might surmise from his name, is rather green, and tends to be unaware of just how much or how little he knows about the world around him. Imbry, on the other hand, is a seasoned con man who has seen it all and told very little. Hughes' prose is perfectly pitched to suit both of these characters, and he provides the reader with many fine moments of recognizing the significance of events described by Harkless, who himself is unaware of their import. Each of the large cast of secondary characters is effortlessly established and identified.

As enjoyable as the criminal investigation is, Hughes manages to take the novel further than the reader might suspect in directions that are totally unexpected. In their effort to ensnare Gebbling, Harkless and Imbry embark on a journey into a mysterious prairie known as the Swept. One of their fellow travellers is a noōnaut, an explorer in what is called the Commons, the collective unconscious of the now-ancient human race. Harkless proves to have a talent for exploring the Commons. In fact, something seems to be calling to him from this mutable world.

As Hughes ups the ante, he manages to turn an exciting, well-written science fiction mystery into an evocative and often profound exploration of the collective human psyche. His descriptions are vivid and colourful, and his methodology for getting there is impeccable. Readers who enjoy the work of Philip K. Dick, H.P. Lovecraft and even Carl Jung will be amazed by Hughes' work in this realm. And readers who were simply looking for a good mystery will be rewarded with reading riches beyond avarice.

But Hughes doesn't venture anywhere in this novel without reason and he never wastes a single word. Every part of this novel is there for a good reason and it all ties together in a very satisfying manner. The police procedural aspects weave seamlessly into the psychological explorations, which lead back to events in Hughes' very real-seeming world. For all the complexity of thought, characterization and prose that Hughes puts into this novel, it's also very accessible. Readers who enjoy a cerebral mystery will find this as delightful as those who are looking for a spine-tingling science fiction novel. It's all this and a comedy of manners, obviously not an easy feat. In the distant future, black brillion may or may not exist, and may or may not work miracles. On this old Earth, *Black Brillion* is nothing less than a miraculous novel.

OLD MAN'S WAR

John Scalzi

Tor hb, 316pp,

\$23.95



Many science fiction readers first encountered the genre when they read Robert A. Heinlein's juvenile novels, often regarded as his best work. With **Old Man's War**, John Scalzi has done no less than write a Heinlein-juvenile-styled novel for the adults who grew up reading the originals. But Scalzi's success is not just nostalgia. He's written a thoroughly entertaining space adventure with a few original twists.

As *Old Man's War* begins, more than a couple of centuries from now, humanity has made it out into space. We're not alone and we're not welcome. There aren't that many planets worth colonizing, and there are lots of aggressive, intelligent species trying to do so. We've got to fight for our right to colonize and terraform. John Perry is seventy-five. His wife is dead and he has little to look forward to except more aches, more pains and the slow descent into old age. So, like many his age, he joins the Colonial Defense Forces. And wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am, he's in the Army now.

From there onwards, Scalzi piles on the fun and cops an attitude that lasts for the entire novel. Mordant and occasionally laugh-lout-loud funny, *Old Man's War* sets up the rules and then plays by them. Scalzi gets around the aging issue with a pretty clever trick that allows him to avoid dealing with the physical issues of growing old. Suffice it to say that the old folks you see on the cover don't last for more than 75 pages. But they bring with them a wealth of experience that occasionally helps them overcome the series of hurdles that Scalzi sets up.

Scalzi does all sorts of stuff right in this novel. He gives his grunts a damn fine gun. In a sort of tribute to Thomas M. Disch's classic story 'Fun With Your New Head', he includes a pamphlet that tells the recruits how to have fun with their . . . but that would be telling. In a nod to the cyberpunks, he gives them a BrainPal and then it's off to war. The battles build cumulatively to a final grudge match that involves brains, brawn and a bit of derring-do.

Written from the first-person point of view of John Perry, Scalzi's prose is serviceably slick and often funny. But he doesn't go overboard. There's a nice meat-and-potatoes feel to this novel. Strangely enough, though this is a novel of space adventure, there's not too much rocket science here. There is enough to get us out in space and a few nice speculative touches to keep you thinking. But this is not a book of big thinks.

Scalzi's universe and his literary format lend themselves to an episodic style. He'll create one set of friends for Perry and then systematically kill them off. If Perry wasn't such a strong presence, the novel might seem disjointed, but Scalzi holds things together pretty well. He does some excellent hint-dropping to set up what proves to be the main thrust of the novel and ties things up rather nicely.

Old Man's War is not just an old man's novel, though it will hold strong appeal to those who first cut their teeth on *Have Spacesuit Will Travel* and especially *Starship Troopers*. But Scalzi establishes his own voice and style in this familiar territory. Scalzi knows a lot of things, something he makes clear in the course of the novel. But he knows one thing vital to any novel's success. He knows how to have fun.

HAMMERED**Elizabeth****Bear**

Bantam Dell pb.

326pp, \$6.99



In 2062, Jenny Casey is a veteran who has seen it all and left bits of herself behind, scattered across the globe. Unlike many, however, she got some pretty effective replacement parts, and they've served her well in her self-chosen career as a sort of enforcer for a beneficent gang-banger. But a bad batch of Hammer, the drug that helped her put a UN-issued boot heel in the faces of Americans rioting after a Fundamentalist Christian takeover – has shown up on her mean streets. She finds herself once again the object of attention of those who built her. It seems that she's survived a good deal longer than most of her ilk. The metal arm and other enhancements she received are apparently indicative of an innate ability to integrate the electronics of tomorrow into her all-too-human frame. Still, they're getting old, she's getting old and the bodies are getting cold. Someone has come to collect her.

Hammered starts to play out as an ultra-gritty police procedural, but as Elizabeth Bear's at-first opaque future takes off its shades, we see there's a lot more at work than a batch of bad drugs. Bear piles on the grim, the grubby and the moderately grotesque, and carefully plots the novel so that it takes a while to suss what precisely is happening and why. Bear's prose is tight and transparent, even though she switches between first and third person narration. This is potentially a very distracting manner of writing a novel, yet in *Hammered* it works a treat. She manages to include a number of hoary ideas from the treasure troves of past science fiction writers, but unpacks them in such a way that they seem once again fresh and exciting. Having set the readers' expectations on earthly matters such as bad drugs and rundown prostheses, she shows no hesitation to go a good deal beyond them. And the gritty underpinnings she establishes make her flights of fancy all the more believable.

But Bear has more than grit on her mind. *Hammered* doesn't exactly wear its science fiction on its sleeve, but it does feature a future in which we've managed to put up a few of these new-fangled beanstalks, a sort of space elevator that allows us to get lots of stuff up there relatively cheaply. So it's not all guns, grit and embittered veterans some 60 years hence. There's a bit of real hope out there. But don't expect to find much of that hope reflected in Bear's fiction, at least not until the present provides some more pleasant pieces to slot into the puzzle she's putting together. Until then, her future is likely to feature the backwash of religious intolerance, failed nation building and a love like no other for squeaky-clean instruments of heinous violence. When betrayal, the big lie, and backstabbing hit the back burner, perhaps we'll see a brighter future. But in the present, in the here-and-now – not the future – the dark-adjusted eye will surely yield the clearest visions.

SCREENPLAY**Neil****Gaiman**

Hill House, 146pp,

free with

subscription

The provenance of a book can be nearly as fascinating as the work itself. Exactly 552 people are going to be able to get their hands on **A Screenplay** by Neil Gaiman. Produced as a bonus and given away to the subscribers of Hill House's Neil Gaiman Author's Preferred Editions series, this history-making artifact takes their private publishing expertise to new heights. It's one thing to offer extended,

author's preferred texts in gorgeously deluxe editions. It's another thing entirely when the author excavates a legendary manuscript from 'a dusty and cobwebbed place on my hard disk, where people never go' and offers it up at no cost for the subscribers to a series of deluxe editions. It's pretty much unprecedented in my experience.

As for the reader's experience, *A Screenplay* is also unprecedented. It seamlessly melds the writer's life with the writer's words, as the light, which enables us to read this work casts shadows over our collective experience of reading Neil Gaiman's work. As you read *A Screenplay*, you're rereading nearly everything you've previously read by Gaiman.

Gaiman's frank though brief introduction offers some insights into the screenwriting process that you might have heard elsewhere, but not quite so straightforwardly. Combined with the text of the screenplay itself, they turn *A Screenplay* into a rewarding, unusually personal reading experience. It's your chance to chat with Neil about a time not so long ago when the first blush of fame had come his way, and he was a younger writer. Between the content of the screenplay itself, Gaiman's short introduction and our own knowledge of what's happened in the intervening years, Gaiman achieves more with the current publication of his screenplay than the screenplay itself.

In large part, however, *A Screenplay* itself does the work. First and foremost, Hill House presents this in an authentic screenplay format, but uses a large font courier type and a large page size to make reading particularly easy and pleasurable. This is a one afternoon read.

If you think that the screenplay format and style is by definition anonymous, you might be, in general, correct. Most screenplays are anonymous, and perhaps that's why most movies are so vapid. This is certainly not the case here. Readers who enjoy Gaiman's humorous monologues, filled with self-mocking wit, will find his entertaining voice largely intact. Even his stage directions make fun of themselves.

A Screenplay has three major elements. There are the stage directions, nicely rendered in Gaiman's usual witty style. Then there's the story, which by and large, reads as Gaiman himself says in the introduction as 'a parallel universe *Good Omens*'. The third – and major – element of *A Screenplay* is the dialogue. Here, Gaiman readers will find themselves on largely familiar ground. You crack a smile as you start reading that will not go away until after you close the book. They can lock Gaiman in a hotel room in North Carolina during a rainstorm but they apparently cannot lock up his subtle, enjoyable wit. The demands of the form do exert a certain gravity. Readers will find words here that do nothing more than the scene requires. But by and large, as in the screen directions, Gaiman's style seeps through the demands of the form.

Reading *A Screenplay* is a pretty peculiar experience. It's thoroughly enjoyable, but on a blurry level that's not quite fiction and not quite non-fiction. As a reader, the movie I manufactured for myself reading it was not the movie that Gaiman's written, but rather the documentary about Gaiman writing the screenplay, expressed in the form of the screenplay itself.



In the proper conditions, a small figure can cast an enormous shadow. *A Screenplay* allows readers to step behind that shadow, to know the small things that create the large darknesses. Shadows and darkness, the endless rains from Los Angeles to North Carolina, anonymous hotel rooms, Aziraphale and Crowley. They're our friends, our intimate friends now. Even more so as we get to see what casts those shadows.

THE LIMITS OF ENCHANTMENT 'Trust the tale and not the teller,' Fern Cullen tells us on the first page of Graham Joyce's new novel, **The Limits of Enchantment**. 'Listen hard. Not to your thoughts, which will mislead you, nor to your heart, which will lie . . .'

Graham Joyce Graham Joyce knows a few things about your heart, it seems. And he's unwilling to lie. Fern Cullen, shedding the last of her sheltered teenage years amidst the English midlands in 1966, tells the tale in Joyce's latest novel. Her voice is rings true, rings close, rings clear, in gorgeous bell-tones that carry the reader effortlessly, buoy us on a breeze, in a whisper. She's learned a lot from her adoptive mother, from her Mammy. The passing of wisdom is commonplace in her life. The passing of wisdom is quite uncommon in ours, and few are those who can do so with the eloquence, the grace and the power of Graham Joyce. There are no limits of enchantment within the experience of reading this novel.

Gollancz hb, 250pp, £14.99

 The book cover features a dark, atmospheric illustration of a woman's face and a landscape, with the title 'The Limits of Enchantment' visible at the bottom.

Set in the years before abortion was made safe and legal, *The Limits of Enchantment* offers a compelling look at the balance of power between men and women, between tradition and science. Joyce's portrait of hedgerow medicine is fascinating and detailed, as is his portrait of rural England in 1966, as change sweeps across the land and indeed around the world. In this microcosm of Fern's world, we see the world at large. When a group of hippies inherit land near Mammy's house, it signals the beginning of the end of Mammy's traditions, and their rebirth in Fern.

What makes the novel so compulsively readable, so utterly pleasurable, goes beyond Joyce's easy prose. He presents for his readers life in full, in its complete state, literally from beginning to end and beyond. The variety of life, from tragedy to farce, is brought to life by his ability to weave humour and hint at horror within a single scene, often within a single paragraph. Joyce renders each scene in Fern's voice with a breathtaking transparency. The tone of the novel shifts naturally, entertainingly, as Fern and Mammy realize the limits of their lives.

Joyce provides a compelling and intricate plot to structure the novel. Within the flawlessly researched environment, Joyce has managed to strip out every single word that might get in the way of creating the story for the reader. The progression of the midlands from an almost prehistoric level of civilization, notch by notch, into the twentieth century, provides an intense drama. Because Joyce so successfully manages to invest his readers in his characters, we care dreadfully for what will happen to them.

The fascinating prehistoric elements of the novel provide the underpinnings for ecstatic flights of visionary writing. Few writers have a mastery of the surreal as engaging as Joyce. He knows precisely how far to take the reader into those moments when the supernatural, the numinous, intrudes into our world and shifts our perceptions beyond the details of our petty lives. He also has the ability to make these visions applicable not only to the characters in the novel but to the readers as well. By scratching about in the universal unconsciousness, he manages to get universal access.

Joyce writes a novel that offers an almost handcrafted feel. Readers who encounter *The Limits of Enchantment* will find that every detail is attended to; every word has earned its place in the novel. It's why he's able to pack so much

life into such a short space. Joyce writes the kind of novel that readers can and should take very slowly, though the temptation will be to read it in a single sitting. Joyce is one of our great novelists, one of the treasures of our time. You need not accept my word for it. Pick up the book. 'Trust the tale and not the teller.'

THE HOUSE OF STORMS

Ian R. MacLeod

Simon & Schuster
hb, 457pp, £12.99



INTERVIEW WITH IAN R. MACLEOD



Ambitious women might not make great mothers, but they do make great characters. Alice Meynell, the ruthless Great Grandmistress of the Guild of Telegraphers fully expects her son Ralph to die when she brings him to Invercombe, on the edge of England at the beginning of Ian R. MacLeod's **The House of Storms**. This is not the England that we know, but the England that MacLeod created for his previous novel, *The Light Ages*, some hundred years hence. The age of aether is still upon the world, and magic shines through the cracks of developing technology. It shines through MacLeod's powerful prose as well, illuminating the novel from within and driving it at a rapid pace. Magic is power – absolute power – and it corrupts absolutely. But, as with any power, it's possible to pull the plug, if you are willing to endure the chaos that can follow. MacLeod throws the switch, pulls the plug and turns in an electrifying novel of people who willingly and unwillingly serve as conduits for powers they can only begin to comprehend.

Invercombe may be a quiet, sleepy, seaside town, but it has a power about it, a sense of place that MacLeod evokes with care. Even Alice Meynell, a mover and shaker used to being the centre of attention in the centres of power, senses this presence. She's strangely happy there, and happier still when Ralph's seemingly terminal condition takes a turn for the better. As he makes an almost miraculous recovery, he slowly falls for one of the servants, Marion Price. Hoping to help his health, Alice encourages the relationship, which rapidly goes further than even she intends. As Ralph discovers Marion, he also discovers with her a process he sees at work in the world, something that together they decide to call Habitual Adaptation. Ralph and Marion plan to study this process, but Alice has plans as well, and the power that courses through her will not allow those plans to be altered.

Though *The House of Storms* takes place in the world that MacLeod created for *The Light Ages*, the novel stands alone more than most sequels, even those intended as 'stand-alone'. No characters are carried over, and the way the world now works is rather different from the previous novel. Moreover, the style is rather different. Whereas *The Light Ages* was suffused with melancholy, *The House of Storms* is suffused with power, the kind of power that burns away the souls of those unfortunate enough to conduct it. This makes *The House of Storms* a quicker, cleaner novel to read.

MacLeod's world and his novel are chock-a-block with ideas as intriguing as his characters and plots. He imbues his novel with exciting riffs from cyberpunk and war epics. Every bit as haunting as Invercombe is Einfell, a colony of changelings nearby. The changelings are those who have suffered so much exposure to aether that they have gone quite far beyond being human. MacLeod makes a frontal assault on both conservative and progressive politics, playing them out to a bloody and very bitter end. But for all the invention, all the playful intellectualizing, the author never loses focus on his characters and an epic arc of murder, madness, mutation and war.

In the end, as compelling as the plot may be, readers will find themselves slowing down, holding back, turning the pages with deliberate care. For the world that MacLeod creates, the characters who live there, the schemes and terrors they find themselves involved in are so real, so beautifully rendered, that readers will not want to leave them behind.



RICK KLEFFEL Q&A IAN R. MACLEOD

How hard – or easy – was it for you to return to the world you'd created in *The Light Ages*?

As these things go, it wasn't that hard. To be honest, I felt a bit guilty about the prospect of adding another dead albatross to the excess of multi-volume which already hang around the genre's neck. But my aim was to write a different book which just happened to be set in the same world, in much the same way that Thomas Hardy did many times with his Wessex.

If *Great Expectations* informed *The Light Ages*, what works of literature, if any, served to inspire *The House of Storms*?

Hardy was high up on the list. And Marion, the book's main if probably most elusive character, was intended as a Hardyesque heroine. And I have to mention Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, which I read just as I was getting into the book, and help reinforce my idea of the perfect but nevertheless destructive summer from which the rest of the book evolves. That, and perhaps L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*. Not that the end result's anywhere near these books, but that's okay. Writing's about setting out to do one thing and ending up doing something else.

***The House of Storms* is a novel that has at its centre two strong but quite different women. Tell us first about how you came to create Alice Meynell, the Great Grandmistress of the Great Guild of Telegraphers?**

Alice came about when it crossed my mind that I perhaps wasn't capable of writing about an essentially evil character. All of the bad people in my previous works have generally only been partly bad, and mostly understandable. But the thought rather set something going, and Alice popped up pretty much fully-grown as its result. She is actually entirely logical by her own standards. She only ever does what she thinks is necessary, and never takes anything more than a mild pleasure, and sometimes feels considerable sadness, about the things she feels she has to do. Basically, she's the calculating predator in all of us taken to its furthest extreme.

Was Marion Price inspired by Florence Nightingale? Were there other influences that went into her character?

Marion's character was, aside from the Hardyesque elements, derived from trying to make a character who is very intelligent and very able in pretty much every regard, but lacks a clear idea of what she wants to do. Rather like Alice, who might in other

ways seem to be her opposite, Marion also has problems with the business of love. As a result, she is buffeted and channelled by events rather than being able to take control of them. On that basis, and in the sort of England which my book describes, which is eventually beset by a bloody civil war, she effectively drifts into becoming one of the icons which the time seems to need. I'd argue, although I'm no expert on the subject, that Florence Nightingale was fulfilling a similar role. If it hadn't been her, it would have been someone else.

Invercombe, the setting of much of *The Light Ages*, doesn't exist on any map. How – and why – did you go about creating the place, and the house itself?

A place on map would have been too restrictive. I wanted a house which was extravagantly beautiful and quietly magical. Somewhere which was very much part of the ebb and flow of time itself – which I suppose helps explain why I put it overlooking an estuary. The West Country setting was in part because I love the West Country, and in part because I needed it there because of the other events which I had in mind for the book.

What kind of historical research went into creating *The House of Storms*?

Not a great deal in the broad sense. I guess I'm fairly grounded in English history, and have a reasonable knowledge of the sort of military conflicts I was paralleling in this world (which would lie somewhere between the American Civil War and World War I). The detail, though, does take a lot of work. Stuff about Bristol and sugar processing and all the maritime stuff which crops up... I don't mind this, though. One of the good things about being a writer is that you have to keep finding out new things.

How do you extrapolate the political forces of this world into the events we see played out in the world of *The House of Storms*?

I suppose I see the two as essentially very similar. In particular, the England I describe at the start of *The House of Storms* hasn't been through the political upheavals which our England has – so the pressure for things to change remains unresolved. My previous book *The Light Ages* covered an attempt to bring about change, but at the end of the day it failed – or perhaps succeeded too easily. So, I felt that this was unfinished business, and, to be honest, I also felt that the only way these things ever seem to happen is through severe conflict. Look at the USA, Spain, China, India, Russia...



How do you suffuse a novel of ideas with such strong characters and emotions?

Because it's what I expect from a book, I suppose. We're emotional beings, and writing should try to express the thought unsaid, the hope unshared: all the soft personal baggage we quietly carry through our lives. Funnily enough, and despite its many lapses and weaknesses in this area, what I'd broadly define as the genre of fantastic fiction is a near-perfect medium to explore this.

Do you find that you succumb to the moods you create as you write the novel? Or are you able to – is it necessary to – keep a distance?

It can be gruelling. The civil war, for example, which, as I've indicated, I accepted into the book as a logical necessity, and which I also believed I had the feel and the knowledge to create, was still a bit of a shock to the system. But there are always touches of humour and humanity, of course, even in the worst of times. From an artistic viewpoint, in fact, a dark background throws them into an even stronger light. The 'wonderful summer' which begins the book was a pleasure to write, but then again, that brightness was made brighter still by the contrast of the storm clouds and forces of history which are gathering ahead. But, no matter how terrible of mundane they are, you can see most events through as a writer if you know, or at least firmly hope, that they have a purpose. In the case of *The House of Storms*, I always knew that the ending was going to be more upbeat than that of *The Light Ages*. So you go through what you have to go through to get there. As Thomas Hardy once said, "If a way to the good ahead lies, it exacts a full look at the worse."



IRON SUNRISE When a star explodes in the universe according to Charles Stross, it might be happenstance. When Wednesday, the plucky teenage girl who escapes the stellar explosion happens to hear voices, it could be coincidence but it's not bloody likely. But when UN Agent Rachel Mansour is called to the carpet for exceeding her expenses under her cover identity as part of the entertainment corps, then readers should have no doubt. It's enemy action, in the form of **Iron Sunrise**, an ass-kicking, takes-no-prisoners science fiction spy adventure from high-flying Charles Stross.



£15.99

Iron Sunrise is a spy kit of science fiction action and speculation, gleaming with deadly surprises and quite mysterious until it's almost entirely unpacked. A lot of people are going to call this novel a space opera, and while it presents the appearance of space opera, what readers really have to hand is a spiky, speculative spy story set several hundred years in the future. Humanity has been flung like a handful of seeds across the galaxy by the not-so-benevolent, almost godlike artificial intelligence that calls itself the Eschaton.

After the titular stellar detonation, a slow motion disaster unfolds. Not only is the populated world of New Moscow destroyed, the remaining Muscovites have (probably falsely) determined that the world of New Dresden is to blame, and they've set planet-killing nukes on a course to destroy it. Survivor Wednesday certainly has some vital clues as to what happened and why. And Rachel Mansour, UN Black Ops specialist, fresh from preventing a nuclear performance art catastrophe (don't ask, just wait for the tension and laughs to unroll, it's worth it) finds herself popped out of the frying pan and into the stellar fire.

Though it might appear as if the novel is escaping Stross with its faster-than-light velocities and the time travel they imply, everything is really under control. Stross deploys set-pieces and puzzle pieces with glee, and Rachel Mansour leads a cast of characters that reach surprising depths there in the depths of space.

As much fun as all the speculation and wild characterisation is, the novel really takes off in the long and compelling final scene. As readers put together the puzzle, everything around the characters starts to fall apart. Stross orchestrates a huge and intricate scene of action like a master, moving his pieces with grace and economy in a game that reveals the spy-novel nature of *Iron Sunrise* while entertaining the heck out of the star-struck reader. And he offers a *coup-de-grace* for dessert that's as satisfying as chocolate.

Though I may take pains to point out the spy-novel nature of *Iron Sunrise* it is a thoroughly satisfying science fiction novel as well. Current scientific understanding is entertainingly extrapolated into a rip-roaring plot. Spunky girls, usually dressed in black, lead the action. The nuclear family is confined to a small space until it reaches a melt-down point. In spite of how modern and clever *Iron Sunrise* feels, it also offers the deep satisfaction of science fiction as many readers first experienced it.

STEPMOTHER Murder, sex, and violent death are perfect ingredients for the kind of children's literature that in reality targets an adult audience. **Stepmother** throws in a few kinks (**Illustrated by Michael Kupperman**) beyond these, then tells the resulting story in a voice so straightforwardly seductive that we can't help but be charmed. Robert Coover's light-hearted fable yanks in just about every character you've ever seen in anything that fell under the label of 'fairy tale' and crams them in a magical forest with a mind of its own. The miracles you experience aren't those of princes transformed into frogs or fair maidens freed from towers, though you'll certainly enjoy reading Coover's spin on these hoary clichés. All the magic happens in the language. The sentences leap playfully from page to page. Characters are created and

destroyed before your inner, your reading eyes. And bubbling underneath, the raging crosscurrents of Story and Idea carry the reader away, away from the clichés, away from cares of mundane fiction. Coover's *Stepmother* is wicked hoot that rides away on a broom from any expectations you might care to bring with you.

Stepmother is a witch in an enchanted forest, trying to free her stepdaughter from a royal prison. The effort is likely to be for naught, but *Stepmother* is a caring parent. Caring but pragmatic; she knows her children tend to end up 'drowned, hung, stoned, beheaded, burned at the stake, impaled, torn apart, shot, put to the sword, boiled in oil, dragged down the street in barrels studded on the inside with nails or nailed into barrels with holes drilled in them and rolled into the river'. She manages to free her child, but finds herself on the run in the forest, fleeing the Reaper, seeking refuge from the Old Soldier, avoiding the Holy Mother (who she calls the Ogress), flying high and laying low. The Story moves towards an Ending, and the reader is well advised not to expect an excess of happiness.

Stepmother is a novella that is one long and impressive balancing act between arch-satire and whimsy, showcasing some of the finest humorous writing you're likely to find. Coover's sentences are clear, punchy and light as a feather; this is the kind of book that you'll want to read aloud.

Complementing the narrative are Kupperman's illustrations, creepy concoctions that remind one of both Roy Lichtenstein and woodcuts. They're a disturbing and effective counterpart to Coover's consistently smooth delivery. They have the look of innocent illustrations for children's literature but the content is often upsettingly adult.

SANDY AUDEN

BRASS MAN

Neal Asher

Tor UK pb, 485pp

£12.99

Neal Asher has always drummed up a healthy dose of space adventure and wicked fun in his novels and **Brass Man** maintains this reputation effortlessly.

It's a year after Skellor was fried in his spaceship at the end of *The Line of Polity*. In a nearby asteroid field, a mining scout ship discovers some strange wreckage and its pilot is taken over by a piece of renegade Jain technology. Before long, Mr Crane – the brass android – is resurrected. He picks up his murderous career where he left off, and continues his attempts to find his identity. Following a trail of destruction, Agent Cormac marshals his Polity support ships and an elite crew to stop a rampant madman. Meanwhile, on the planet of Cull, a Knight is looking for a Dragon to slay, if he can just survive his travelling companion's evil intentions . . .

There's lots more plot than this mere shaving, of course. Asher has created another multi-threaded romp full of awesome spaceships, awesome weapons, and vicious drooling beasties with awesome appetites.

Once more Agent Cormac is the vortex around which all the other determined, dysfunctional and frightened characters orbit. All of these other characters are seen in detail, close up with their various situations and ambitions. Cormac himself, though, seems to have no personal life and little emotional reaction to the events around him. Only once in *Brass Man* does the soft underbelly of his personality get laid bare. But as soon as it appears it's gone, shielded once more and invulnerable. He's a very unusual hero.

Asher's humour is evident once more in this latest novel – it's lurking in the dire situations, lightening the mood. It's an appreciated effect, because Asher skilfully moves his characters in ever tightening circles. Sense gives way to desperation; situations become taut, and something has to snap. It does, without warning, and suddenly you're in

free-fall, with the conclusion of the book rushing up at you head on. It's just a shame that the impact of the ending is diffused slightly, by raising as many questions as it answers.

LAVIE TIDHAR

BANNER OF SOULS On a far-future Earth a girl is being grown who is a hitobashira, a 'woman-who-holds-back-the-flood'. The girl, **Liz Lunae**, can shift time at will, but neither she nor her two guardians – the Martian warrior Dreams-of-War and the kappa nurse Tersus Rhee – know what Lunae's real purpose is. The world of **Banner of Souls** is old, wounded and infused with a peculiar melancholy. Earth had fragmented into isolated islands ruled by the Martian Matriarchy, itself fighting for control against the mysterious distant colony of Nightshade on the edge of the solar system. For the women of Nightshade have discovered haunt-tech, and with it brought to Earth the alien kami, souls without bodies capable of possessing the living. Grown up on Nightshade, meanwhile, Yskatarina's purpose is to find and kill Lunae for her powerful aunt. A girl with artificial arms and legs and a built-in loyalty, she is accompanied by an Animus, a powerful artificial creature closely linked to her and together they come to Earth to hunt the hitobashira.

Liz Williams has created a complex, evocative far-future world where fantasy is couched in advanced science, a planetary romance that is less interested in the future than the past. It is fast-paced, exciting, the strong female characters (in a world almost barren of remaining males) are wonderfully drawn, and the mystery of Lunae's destiny carries the reading experience forward with well-planted hooks and only a modicum of information dumping. For all that, though, *Banner of Souls* feels sometimes less like an original creation and more as a series of homage to the science fiction and science fantasy of the past. Some of the melancholy (and the great Dragon-Kings, giant and ancient weather changing machines who remain in the oceans) seem to come out of Simak; some of the lushness and female warriors from C.L. Moore; the strange landscape of Mars seems imbued with the same kind of nostalgia that informs Kevin O'Neill's artwork in the second volume of the *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, itself a work of profound pastiche; and while Williams takes all these diverse elements and combines them into a captivating whole it is nevertheless a less original work than it perhaps deserves to be.

A fast-paced, gender-conscious decadent adventure through a fantastical solar system, time and space, this is a highly-entertaining read that still manages to raise some serious questions of identity and choice. A good, fun book; and if Williams can put behind her the ghosts of science fiction past then she may well be capable of producing a future masterpiece.

PAUL KINCAID

CONSTELLATIONS In any collection of short stories, the Introduction is usually the last thing written. When an Introduction is dated some eighteen months before the book is actually published it tends to suggest that someone, somewhere does not have overwhelming faith in the project. When you look at the **Constellations** collection of stories, it is easy to see why. True it brings together fifteen of the brightest stars in contemporary British science fiction, but it does so at a time when the high wave of the British renaissance has already begun to recede. And although a cast which includes Brian Aldiss, Stephen Baxter, Gwyneth Jones, Paul



£12.99

McAuley, Ian McDonald and Justina Robson is unlikely to produce out and out duds, none of them is exactly firing on all cylinders here.

Mind you, that may be something to do with the brief. Having seen Peter Crowther through anthologies on such hoary old sf topics as the Moon and Mars, Daw has now given him the stars. And it is pretty clear that this is not exactly the most exciting of topics. Indeed, a surprising number of writers have abandoned science fiction for mysticism and fantasy in order to meet the brief, at best, only tangentially, while what is perhaps the best story here, 'The Meteor Party' by James Lovegrove, is a straightforward mainstream tale of a dysfunctional group of friends who gather to watch a meteor shower and find it an unexpected opportunity to confront their various failures.

Curiously, it is the other stories that stray furthest from science fiction that tend to be the best in the collection, most notably Ian McDonald's 'Written on the Stars', which imagines a steampunk world in which every action is dictated by one's horoscope, and Colin Greenland's 'Kings', a post-apocalyptic variant on the story of the three kings. Both promise rather more than they actually deliver, as does Adam Roberts' 'The Order of Things' which starts promisingly with an account of a puritanical world in which the coastlines are being smoothed out and the very stars occupy a rigid grid pattern in the heavens, although the story ends just at the point that the plot is starting.

The more science-fictional stories tend to be less effective. There aren't any real stinkers (though 'A Heritage of Stars' by Eric Brown is a notably weak way to start any collection), but they do tend to follow rather predictable courses. Paul McAuley's story of a desperate race to escape an enemy spaceship in 'Rats of the System', Stephen Baxter's revelation of how people can adapt to extreme conditions on alien worlds in 'Lakes of Light', Justina Robson's account of a matter transmission experiment gone wrong (and a story which barely pays lip service to the theme of the anthology), 'The Little Bear', and Alastair Reynolds' story of a spaceship which accidentally finds itself transported to a remote corner of the galaxy, 'Beyond the Aquila Rift', are all decent, reliable examples of storytelling. But they would have been decent, reliable sf tales any time in the last twenty or thirty years; there is nothing here that feels particularly fresh or surprising.

Of the pure science fiction, only 'The Fulcrum' by Gwyneth Jones really feels as if it is pushing at the envelope. It plays with the idea of what it is to be alien as two space tourists find themselves out of place in a hard-bitten, rundown space station where the only way they can avoid the threats of the two thugs who run the place is to confront something truly alien. Even this story doesn't quite work, but more from too much ambition rather than too little; there's an awful lot crammed into a short space, and it would have worked better at a longer length.

That said, this is not a collection that will disappoint you, it's just not a collection that will excite you, either.

COLIN HARVEY

NEBULA AWARDS SHOWCASE This is the 39th volume of the annual **Nebula Awards Showcase** by which the SFWA honour the best sf and fantasy of the year. With each passing year time covers the past with another layer of sediment, until, what in genre terms is the Dawn of Time (the 1920s), is now buried so deep that the contents of the current volume would be unrecognisable as sf to a reader of *Amazing Stories* or *Weird Tales* of that epoch.

In recent years, editors have reprinted a narrow selection – the winners, a runner-up short-story and

Peter Crowther Daw pb, \$6.99 · **Constellations** editor **Dann** Roc pb, 336pp, \$14.95 · **COLIN HARVEY**

In any collection of short stories, the Introduction is usually the last thing written. When an Introduction is dated some eighteen months before the book is actually published it tends to suggest that someone, somewhere does not have overwhelming faith in the project. When you look at the **Constellations** collection of stories, it is easy to see why. True it brings together fifteen of the brightest stars in contemporary British science fiction, but it does so at a time when the high wave of the British renaissance has already begun to recede. And although a cast which includes Brian Aldiss, Stephen Baxter, Gwyneth Jones, Paul



novelette and/or novella, most from Asimov's and already widely available – but Jack Dann instead significantly improves the book by including almost all the short-story and novelette finalists, many of which will be unavailable to most readers. He's also crammed in the poetry winners, a symposium on the newest movements within the field, an autobiographical essay by Barry Malzberg, and reprints from the latest Author Emeritus Charles L. Harness, and Grand Master Robert Silverberg.

Most of the stories – those by Jeffrey Ford, Richard Bowes and the more traditional sf-nal pieces by Molly Gloss, James van Pelt, Eleanor Arnason and post-cyberpunk Cory Doctorow – are individually excellent.

Paradoxically, Dann's wide selection highlights two depressing trends when the book is viewed as a whole. The longer-form ballots are dominated by traditional sf (ironically, the novella winner by Neil Gaiman is the only fantasy on the ballot), but the shorter-form finalists indicate much of the SFWA's membership preferring a headlong retreat from sf, especially hard sf, toward a crypto-contemporary quasi-fantasy.

The second trend is that many of the authors are too busy mining the shallow shale of earlier works to dig deep into the virgin territory of new ideas, new trends, preferring instead to proudly show off gems that are only the polishings of fossil classics. Carol Emshwiller's is a revisionist superhero story, Harlan Ellison offers '[if] James Hilton . . . had written . . . Ionescu's "Rhinoceros"', Karen Joy Fowler presents a 'response' to a classic Tiptree, and Adam-Troy Castro is two-thirds of the way through before he leaves behind Le Guin's Omelas, and ventures into uncharted territory. Sadly, Silverberg's still magnificently audacious 'Sundance', from 1969, is the strongest story in the book.

A brave attempt by Dann to showcase the awards, rendered counterproductive by the SFWA membership themselves. One for the completists, or those who prefer contemporary fantasy to sf.



GRAHAM SLEIGHT

THE WIZARD In *The Road to Middle Earth*, Tom Shippey asks a good question: 'Few modern readers of *Beowulf*, or the *Elder Edda*, or the Icelandic "family sagas", can escape a certain feeling of inadequacy as they contemplate whole sequences of comprising characters who appear, in a casual and quite lifelike way, not to know what fear is. How would we manage in such a society? With our culture's characteristic "softness, worldliness, and timidity" would we be fit for anything but slavery?' (p72)

477pp, \$25.95) Gene Wolfe's **The Wizard Knight** (published last year in the US by Tor in two volumes, and forthcoming from the UK publisher Millennium in one) is an answer to Shippey. A boy from contemporary America slips through a portal into the fantastic world of Mythgarthr. Almost instantly he is named Sir Able of the High Heart. Only slightly less instantly, he falls in love with Disiri, one of the Aelf who haunt Mythgarthr, and finds himself in the body of a full-grown adult. The text of *The Wizard Knight* is a vast letter Able writes back to his brother Ben in our world, the story of how he attempts to get back to Disiri.

In a way, *The Wizard Knight* seems like a hugely extended remake of Wolfe's story 'A Cabin on the Coast' (collected in *Endangered Species*, 1989). In both, a young man slips into Faerie and spends many years there (a lot of it on board ships) trying to regain the woman he lost. But in the short story, somehow he makes the wrong choices and is savagely punished at the end. Able, on the other hand, is passionately concerned with doing the right thing, with



the honour and courage that, he believes, constitute being a knight.

Fantasy has always been a form which allows the author to talk about moral essentials – not just for Christians like Tolkien or C.S. Lewis (the author of the line Shippey quotes about 'softness') but also for, say, Philip Pullman or Neil Gaiman. As with Wolfe's 90s works, *The Book of the Long Sun* and *The Book of the Short Sun*, much of *The Wizard Knight* is taken up by a protagonist who desperately wants to be good talking with the rest of the huge cast, finding out who they are and what matters to them. These books are, in other words, about the *variousness* of the world, and the difficulty of understanding it fully. To understand it fully would be to know automatically what was right; but the truth is occluded from Wolfe's narrators, like the rest of us. So there's a sense that *The Wizard Knight* challenges its readers as much as it does Able: if you don't understand why Able wants to relay a particular conversation or event, you're failing to read as carefully as you should.

That might make *The Wizard Knight* sound like a trial, a sermon rather than a novel. But the chance to write a pure fantasy seems to have been refreshing for Wolfe, and this is his most inventive work for years. Wolfe's debt to Tolkien is on record (see his essay 'The Best Introduction to the Mountains' in IZ174), and is evident throughout *The Wizard Knight* along with a range of other influences. The names have a Nordic flavour, but the cosmology – Mythgarthr is the fourth of seven concentric worlds – recalls Ptolemaic crystal spheres, or maybe Dante. Fantasy props like ogres or dragons appear, but transfigured by the questioning clarity of Able's vision. That doesn't mean, though, that Wolfe has abandoned any of his characteristic complexity: Able falls silent in a number of situations, particularly when sexual material threatens. But the gap between Able's and the reader's comprehension mimics the gap between him and home, which he feels at times with an extraordinary intensity.

There's plenty to argue with in *The Wizard Knight*. Is morality as simple as Able comes to believe? Should we really be longing for a hierarchical medieval world where everyone knows their place, where the greatest glory is to be an able fighting man? But you could make similar arguments against Tolkien, and *The Wizard Knight* belongs with *The Lord of the Rings* and few other fantasies for its utter conviction. Able means every word he says, and looks you in the eye, and asks you the hardest questions there are.



DAVID MATHEW

CONVERSATIONS
WITH RAY
BRADBURY

Editor
Steven L.

Aggells

University Press of Mississippi, 208pp.
no price shown



'By the year 2000 science fiction will dominate the mainstream literature of our time,' stated Ray Bradbury in an interview with Shel Dorf in 1975 (reprinted here in **Conversations With Ray Bradbury**), 'because it is the literature of our time, more important and more exciting and more creative than all the works of Malamud, Roth, and Mailer put together! We are paying attention to the totality of Mankind, while they are playing around in Brooklyn Heights and Levittown and boring us into the grave.'

Not for one instant would I imagine the author to be sweating in his dotage, palming a blow to his forehead and giving himself a stern talking-to for publicising such wrongfooted optimism. Indeed, one of the beauties – the many beauties – of this excellent labour of love (a painstakingly compiled collection with interviews with Bradbury, by many hands, collected between 1948 and 2002) is that he is happy – compelled, perhaps – to exhibit his opinions with the thrusting self-righteousness of any punk

rocker. Agree with his stance or not, you won't stop reading. Oh yes: say what you will about his fiction (and for the record, I'm a big fan), you won't be left in any doubt about how Bradbury feels, having read this book, about a huge fanned deck of subjects.

'How come we're looking at our shoes instead of at the great nebula in Orion? Where did we mislay the moon and back off from Mars? The problem is, of course, our politicians, men who have no romance in their hearts or dreams in their heads. JFK . . . challenged us to go to the moon. But even he wasn't motivated by astronomical love . . . once we reached the moon, the romance started to fade . . .' These are but a few sentences of several pages that Bradbury direct in rebuke towards NASA. (The interviewer even asks, later, and straight-faced it would seem: 'What's the biggest mistake NASA has made?')

None of which is to suggest, of course, that multi-billion dollar organisations are the sole repositories for Bradbury's wrath. He talks on, fuelled even by such inanely-framed questions as 'What's your feeling about the 2 Live Crew controversy; explicit lyrics in music and explicit sex in movies?' and 'Do you perceive the Rushdie affair as having long-term ramifications on the publishing of controversial work?'

And strong opinions are what we seek when contemplating the purchase of a book of interviews. Bradbury works well with the great and the far-from-great of interviewing techniques. He emerges, easily, as a very intelligent, sporadically grumpy man, with a voice that on occasion seems unlike that of the author whose fiction many of us have visited and revisited down the years.

I have heard Ray Bradbury's spoken voice, in interview; I can remember thinking (as I have thought about other authors): *Didn't expect him to sound like that*. The same impression was upon me while dipping in and out of this trove of half-a-century's (sometimes contradictory) on-the-spot opinion-making. By all means watch as Bradbury develops as an interviewee (it's a joyful process), but don't expect to learn much about him as a man. Expect, on the other hand, to learn a great deal about him as a writer. What more would you like to know? It's all in here.

If we add to the above a recognition of Bradbury's astonishing power of recall, a doffed hat to Aggelis' excellent introduction, to his rigorous referencing, and a round of applause for the highly professional production values, and it must be clear that your reviewer is here to recommend this work without hesitation. Not solely for the fans, this book could – and should – be enjoyed by anyone with an interest in good writing, or in the examination on an incredible timeline of ever-developing talent.



GARY COUZENS

THE POCKET BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION by John Costello (Pocket Essentials, pb, 160pp, £4.99)

It's hard to imagine in these days of multiple channels, video and DVD, that the only way of seeing a film that wasn't on at your local cinema was to catch it on a TV showing. And VCRs weren't around, so that meant staying up late if needs be to catch that film you'd heard lots about but hadn't been able to see up to now. Some-where around 1974/5, ten-year-old me watched a series of sf films on BBC1 shown on early Wednesday evenings. That's something else that dates me: many of these films were black and white, and when was the last time you saw a black and white film on primetime BBC1? Back then you could, as British colour TV was less than a decade old and many people you knew still had monochrome sets. That was the first time I saw *Forbidden Planet*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Village of the Damned*, *When Worlds Collide* and many more. Imprinting time, no doubt. I'm

also sure that John Costello, author of **The Pocketbook of Science Fiction Films**, is of similar age to me: he even names one TV showing – the British premiere of *Dark Star*, on BBC2 over Christmas 1977, before it ever showed (briefly) in UK cinemas – that I saw as well.

I hope you'll forgive the nostalgic excursion above, but in many ways it was easier to become an sf movie fan back then, before George Lucas packed them in with *Star Wars*. Nowadays, the most obscure B movie (complete with anamorphically enhanced picture quality from the best available source, remastered sound and knowledgeable extras) is available with the aid of a credit card and a few mouse clicks from anywhere in the world that will post it to you. But back then, a more Reithian principle applied, to give the public what it didn't know it would like until it saw it. It was a more innocent age back then, but one in which you could make your own discoveries.

Costello covers the history of the sf genre in a straight-ahead chronological fashion from Méliès' *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902) onwards. The chapters (which count from 10 to 0, liftoff style) start off with a brief discussion of the period's major themes. In the 50s, it was paranoia about the other; in the 70s, dystopian themes abounded. Nowadays, post 9/11, the fear of annihilation is greater than ever. The rest of the chapters deal with individual films, given shorter or longer shrift as appropriate, with star ratings out of five. Most of his opinions seem generally sensible, though no doubt anyone reading this will take issue at some point or another. He's down on *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, which I think is a far better film than he makes out. Certainly most of the obvious titles are there, and I'm glad to see coverage of lesser-known gems like *Miracle Mile* (1988) and *Last Night* (1998) as well. Inevitably, even more so in a book designed for your pocket, there are omissions. *Zero Population Growth* and the underrated 1984 version of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* aren't there, for example, and it's fair to say that the book is far stronger on films from the USA and UK than elsewhere. (Antipodean film sf isn't covered beyond the *Mad Max* trilogy and foreign-language coverage is weak.) Costello takes pains to exclude monster movies, fantasy and horror in favour of a reasonably strict definition of sf. Films which are both horror and sf, such as *Alien* and John Carpenter's remake of *The Thing*, get a mention: in fact those two are in Costello's personal Top Ten. (The other eight, in chronological order, are: *Forbidden Planet*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Dark Star*, *Mad Max 2*, *Blade Runner* and *The Terminator*. Hmm, no great surprises there.)

The final chapters of the book cover sf animated features and a selection of turkeys. Some of these I'd certainly take issue with. *Logan's Run*, *Flash Gordon* (1980) are better than that, and even *Waterworld* isn't as bad as its reputation. I can certainly understand people hating *Zardoz*, though it's the sort of deranged, very personal and idiosyncratic work you see too little of in mainstream cinema. Costello's book ends with a listing of relevant books, magazines and websites.

If you'd like to (re)join Interzone's team of book reviewers please contact Iain (iain@austgate.co.uk) or Andy (ttapress@aol.com).

Next issue sees the welcome return to these pages of John Clute.

SUSANNA CLARKE & COLIN GREENLAND

ANDY HEDGESECK

INTERVIEW

SUSANNA CLARKE & COLIN GREENLAND



JONATHAN STRANGE & MR NORRELL by **SUSANNA CLARKE** Bloomsbury hb, 782pp, £17.99
FINDING HELEN by **COLIN GREENLAND** Black Swan pb, 367pp, £6.99



The pitfalls and possibilities of two writers working in the same domestic setting are well documented. Think about the tragically one-sided literary arms race of Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell, or the intense, intimate and fatally charged collaboration of Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris. On a brighter note, consider Percy Shelley's encouragement of Mary in turning her waking dream into the novel *Frankenstein*, or the converging obsessions of Paul Auster and Siri Hustvedt.

Colin Greenland and Susanna Clarke see the impact of their relationship on their writing as entirely positive and very practical. For them, stories may be informed by shared experience but writing is a solitary process.

"Susanna does the writing and I do the washing up," says Greenland. "It works very well."

Clarke confirms this nuts and bolts perspective on literary partnership. "The kind of support we give each other is based on the idea that writing is something we have to do. At times I've needed to tell Colin his work is important and worthwhile. Sometimes, he needed financial support so I took a full time job. And he supported me so I could write in the morning and at weekends. He did all the washing up, he did all the laundry, so when I came back from my full time job all I had to do was go to sleep, watch *Buffy* or write. The support we give each other is very real but it isn't artistic and it isn't literary."

I'm talking to Clarke and Greenland in the Borders bookshop café in Cambridge. They've just returned from a US tour, promoting Clarke's best-selling first novel *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*: clearly elated by the book's commercial success and critical acclaim, neither of them exhibits the slightest sign of jet lag. We're straining to hear each other above the clatter of crockery and clamour of families taking a break from the exigencies of half term shopping.

I ask them if, in spite of the pragmatic approach they take to sustaining parallel

literary careers, the work of each partner provides inspiration for the other.

"No," says Clarke. "I don't think we have any influence on each other at all. We read some of the same things, we watch the same movies, we go on the same holidays and we talk about dreams, TV and stuff. There's a lot of shared experience even if there aren't any shared conversations about what we're going to be working on next. We only read each other's work when it's nearly finished, or completely finished in the case of *Strange and Norrell*. Colin knew the names of the characters, but that was about all. He wanted to be part of the audience rather than the backstage crew."

"I didn't know who the characters were, just that they existed," confirms Greenland. "There was one exception: Susanna does the research at the same time as the writing so, for a month or more, I couldn't get a word out of her that wasn't to do with the Duke of Wellington. In terms of my writing she did some good work for me on *Finding Helen*, but I had a complete draft by then . . ."

"He shows me things when he's ready for me to see them," says Clarke. "But his agent and editor have often seen them by then. I know Colin has lots of ideas in his head about the next book but hasn't yet got them down on paper. He knows what he wants to do with it. The only time I discover where his stories are going is when he tells someone else about them and I happen to listen in."

Clarke and Greenland share an obvious relish for the fantastic and the possibilities it offers to storytellers. I ask if they see fantasy as a means of tapping into aspects of contemporary experience that literary fiction can't reach.

"I'm reluctant to separate fantasy from the rest of literature," says Greenland. "If you said fantasy was the *part* of literary fiction that dealt with certain aspects of experience, I think we might be heading in the right direction. Dreams. The unconscious. Wishes and desires. ➤

ANCIENT ECHOES, DOMESTIC CHORES AND THE PROCESS OF UNLEARNING



SUSANNA CLARKE AND COLIN GREENLAND HAVE JUST RETURNED FROM A US TOUR

Fantasy is an effective way of isolating certain things and keeping other things out of the way. I always go back to Lewis Carroll, when I think about this. In *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, for example, everything on the other side is the same, just the other way around . . . ”

Clarke isn't convinced the fantasy form has any kind of special status, except perhaps that bestowed by the accomplishments of its current practitioners. “You have to spend longer looking at a photograph of yourself printed the wrong way around – maybe there's an additional degree of clarity that comes from an unusual way of seeing things. But I wouldn't have thought there was anything fantasy can tell us about people that other fiction can't. I think what it does at the

moment – and I'm not suggesting this is an eternal phenomenon by any means – is that it seems to be able to tell better stories. A lot of good storytellers at the moment are telling fantastic tales: but I'd argue that reflects more on the imagination and craft of the writers concerned than on the form itself.”

Greenland agrees with the assertion that fantasy has become a hotbed of potent storytelling, but feels this development is rooted in cultural factors rather than the serendipitous convergence of a generation or two of gifted writers.

“It's partly a symptom of the 'big split' of modernism after the First World War, when writers lost their faith in stories and language and everything became fragmented. They made new

forms because they felt the old forms were no longer relevant, and this caused a separation between the novel and the storytelling tradition. The novel went off and became an art of its own, while genre fiction came along to meet the expectations of a popular audience. So Eliot, Pound, Joyce and the cubists moved away from the social context of their art. At the same time Tolkien was making up fairy stories for his own amusement and to entertain his children. As he found a bigger and bigger audience, the genre we now call fantasy began to develop. A genre constituted around the traditions of the culture, maintaining and upholding all the old verities.

“This regrouping around stories has sometimes been at the expense of

reaching those difficult aspects of the human condition you referred to. There are many, many genre stories with no discernible elements of human experience or feeling. But at its best, there is a richness to the genre, and a vast amount of the shared experience people are crying out for."

Grounding the magic

Susanna Clarke was catapulted into the realm of lit-biz celebrity with a clamorous publicity campaign; nominations for the Whitbread First Novel and Guardian First Book awards; and a place on the 2004 Booker Prize long list. Early reviews headed for familiar signposts – Rowling, Tolkien and Peake – but Clarke's vast and compelling narrative, a deft blend of fantasy, folklore, alternate history and social satire, defies classification. And what, at first, read like an overnight success story was anything but. There was more than a decade between the conception of Strange and Norrell and the publication of their story.

I ask Clarke if she was working with a brew of genres from the start, or if the story accreted these elements as it unfolded.

I mention the tendency to overlook the communion of English folklore and Celtic mythology, a concealed tradition highlighted by the counter-cultural mythos of Mark Chadbourn.

"There are these echoes of ancient things. I looked at Katherine Briggs, the folklorist of the mid-twentieth century: there are a lot of her books on fairies still in print. It's all very fragmentary, as proper folklore tends to be, but I developed a sort of feel for it. And I looked at Scottish, Irish and Welsh folklore and drew on what was useful for the book. That was just about the only research I did for the magical elements of the story. I did look at the activities of magicians, astrologers, and alchemists before those practices veered off and became science. In the case of Dr Dee and Elias Ashmole, it was their spells for summoning fairies that interested me rather than their other occult activities.

"I didn't begin researching magic until I started writing: my interest in it until that point was purely fictional – reading C.S. Lewis and Tolkien. I wasn't particularly interested in the real background then, and I'm not really interested in it now. When I finished

between Strange and Norrell, which evolves from mistrust to admiration to friendship to bitter rivalry.

"I knew I wanted to write a fantasy, then I realised I wanted to set it in England rather than a completely fantastic place. I knew this meant I had to introduce a chronology of English magicians and I quickly came to the idea of a very powerful medieval magician at one end of the story and two magicians, a partnership, in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century. But once I got the idea of the two of them and established their characters, a lot of things flowed very easily from there. So that relationship was a very early and formative idea."

Norrell is obsessive, rigorous and controlling; Strange, the younger and less experienced of the two, is charming, intuitive and drawn to risk. I ask what put this obsessive professional relationship at the heart of the story.

"As one of the other characters points out, if there were six magicians in England it would make for a much easier relationship: the rivalry is inevitable when there are only two. For both Strange and Norrell, the love of

"I think it was always going to be a fantasy novel. I started mimicking that kind of social satire: it wasn't necessarily intentional, but it just felt very easy to do"

SUSANNA CLARKE ON THE WRITING OF JONATHAN STRANGE AND MR NORRELL

"I think it was always going to be a fantasy novel. I started mimicking that kind of social satire: it wasn't necessarily intentional, but it just felt very easy to do. And the folklore element was always there, but it became more English as I went on. I knew I wanted to write about England but then I realised, partly through work on short stories as well as the novel, I needed to ground the magical element as firmly as I could. So I began to bolster it with British folklore.

"I started looking at what remained of the mythology of fairies. Belief in fairies was more clearly developed – and recorded – in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, but we do know something about English fairy folklore. So I brought that in when I was working on the fairy element of the story."

Jonathan Strange and Dr Norrell I looked at the history of Tarot cards, which touched on the history of the occult. I found the entire area very, very boring and slightly intellectually suspect. At times I had no real idea what the sources I consulted were going on about. The occult seems to be about mystery and inventing mystery for the sake of it. And I don't quite get it."

Clarke's scepticism does nothing to undermine the credibility of her enchanted epic. The splendid set pieces – characters raised from the dead, animated statuary and the crossing of boundaries between worlds – work because we are shown the practical exertions behind the magic. And the sense of engagement is heightened by the subtle rendition of the relationship

discovering more magic and learning about it is greater than the other parts of their character. It's the thing that drives some of the tragedy of the story, but it also provides an element of redemption in the end.

"While I was in America, someone at one of the readings pointed out that all the men in the book are obsessive, all completely taken up with their own worlds and very poor at picking up what is going on around them. It's an interesting point, but there aren't many women to contrast that with. The men in the book are politicians, magicians or soldiers – all highly absorbing professions – whereas the women, such as Strange's wife, Arabella, are more concerned with the people around them, and with looking after them. In

part, it's a feature of the Regency era."

The early nineteenth century holds considerable fascination for Clarke, and this was a factor in her choice of historical foundation for her magic and folklore.

"At first I thought Strange and Norrell were going to be Eighteenth Century magicians but once I got started they migrated to the early Nineteenth Century, probably because of Jane Austen. I felt very much at home with Jane Austen's style and the social setting she described. It was a transitional period, a time when servants were sometimes part of the family, before the 'upstairs-downstairs' era. There was a sense of responsibility for the welfare of people in service and, in some cases, a reciprocal sense of loyalty. Men were supposed to go out into the world and have their professions; women had few legal rights but were respected by their husbands, brothers and fathers to some extent. In some cases they wielded considerable influence in the home and didn't necessarily feel inferior. That isn't why I chose the era, but it is one of the things that attracted me to it. I feel more comfortable there than in the later part of the nineteenth century. Actually, quite a few Americans seem to think I have written a book about Victorian England."

Clarke's relish for the period and the alternative history she has created for it suggest a return to the world of Strange and Norrell is inevitable. But will her readers have another opportunity to meet the magicians themselves?

"I will be returning to their world. I honestly can't say whether we'll meet the two of them again, but I know quite a lot about the next book. It will start a few years after the end of the first and some of the same characters will be there. But this time I want to include more about women and people lower down the social scale. When I began *Strange and Norrell* I had no idea it would be such a very male book: that's the way it turned out, however, to meet the needs of that particular story. The women in *Strange and Norrell* have a lot of influence on the story, but they are quite deep down in the narrative mix. They are invisible for long periods. Nobody bears in mind what Arabella wants, until they finally remember her."

Everything is normal, but . . .

Colin Greenland's first book, *The Entropy Exhibition* (1983), an expanded

version of his PhD thesis, provided the definitive critical assessment of the new wave of science fiction of the 1960s and 1970s. His first novel, *Daybreak on a Different Mountain*, was published in 1984. Greenland now sees this story, centring on a mythic quest, as excessively academic: "It's very wordy and intellectual – and I'm not sure there are many human beings in it."

Throughout his career, Greenland has continued to produce criticism, writing for publications such as *The Face*, *New Statesman* and the *Guardian*. I ask if this work has impacted on his approach to storytelling.

"It has, and it's a problem. Reviewing each sentence as I write it isn't always helpful. Studying English Literature, becoming a literary critic, in a small way, and teaching have taught me everything in the world about books – apart from how to put one together. I've had to unlearn a lot of things. If you look at the development of my novels you will see a progressive rejection of the idea novels are made out of themes and ideas. I'm gradually finding my way back to storytelling, which is essential. I meet writers who feel the world owes them a living and should listen to them. I've never really felt that. There are other fish in the sea, there were fish before me and there will be fish after me."

Greenland's next books were once again in the fantasy vein, but *The Hour of the Thin Ox* (1987) and *Other Voices* (1988) rejected baroque mythmaking in favour of more realistic settings, and were considerably more accessible than their predecessor. His next departure was a sequence of science fiction novels: the award-winning *Tabitha Jute* trilogy (*Take Back Plenty*, 1990; *Seasons of Plenty*, 1995; and *Mother of Plenty*, 1998) is sharply witty space opera, while *Harm's Way* (1993) is a thoughtful and engaging steampunk story.

"When I finished the sequence of big books with *Harm's Way* in the middle, I was tired and I really wanted to calm down. There's a kind of built-in frustration in genre fiction: you feel you have to use everything available to you. You know that essay by Ursula Le Guin, 'Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown'? It's perfectly possible to get Mrs Brown into the spaceship but it takes hard work. I was really thrilled when Ursula gave me a quote for *Take Back Plenty*, a great moment for me as you can imagine. I ended up signing a copy to her, and I

put 'perhaps if Mrs Brown owns the spaceship?' That was my solution: Mrs Brown is Tabitha Jute, and it's Tabitha Jute's ship. After that I wanted to calm down and write something that used my memories and observations."

The reflective, enigmatic *Finding Helen* (2003) is the product of that process of calming down. A tale of lost idealism, memory and obsession that explores the borderlands of fantasy and reality, the book is a powerful evocation the 1970s, the fag end of an era of utopian idealism.

"It was an enormously formative period, but it didn't go anywhere. Thatcher came along; the eighties came along. Suddenly you had to cut your hair; there weren't hippies anymore, there were yuppies. All the possibilities of the 1960s went nowhere. *Finding Helen* was about reclaiming some of that: it asks, in a dreamlike way, what was the legacy of that time, what was good about it? A lot of what went on was risible, I suppose, but there's a heart still beating in the middle of it. I created a version of me that never became a writer and asked how he would be feeling when he looked back on the 1970s. Then I gave him a fantasy figure to find his way back towards. And in a way I think I did find my way back there, I feel more at peace with that time and its trappings than I did when I started writing the book."

Greenland's work in progress is *Losing David*. I ask if, as the title implies, there are points of connection with *Finding Helen*.

"Yes, in that it's another 'LitFic' book! *Finding Helen* is a LitFic book: everything is normal, but one of the characters may not be entirely human. In *Losing David*, everything is normal except that one of the characters isn't there at all: my heroine has an imaginary friend called David when she's a girl; and when she grows up he's still there. She confides details of her life in him. Secrets nobody else can keep."

"At the moment it's all on index cards – there are 15 or 16 chapters with a card for each chapter. I've done a short draft and got a very good response from my editor. All I've got to do is get on with it – as long as Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell don't walk into my book." He laughs. "At the moment I'm enjoying all the attention Susanna is getting: it's great fun and, in a way, I'm thriving on the neglect: everyone can talk to her and I'll just get on with my work. That's what I'm hoping!"



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A world of his own christopher east

The package sat on Joseph Average's coffee table like

an unexploded bomb. It was about the size of a shoebox, wrapped in bit-paper animated with small, comical humanoid figures which ran and danced playfully across its surface. Grumbling a curse, Joe stared at it briefly from the front doorway of his three-room apartment, then walked over for a closer inspection.

TOUCH ME HERE read a blinking inscription on the belly button of one of the figures. Intrigued, Joe extended an index finger and poked at the indicated navel.

Instantly the bit-paper dissolved and the box underneath unfolded, its simple shape contorting in one pre-programmed spasm into a complicated origami bird's-nest. Sitting in the nest, in the lotus position, was a small humanoid doll, smooth of skin, devoid of feature, a uniform gray in color. The androgynous idol was about the size of a loaf of bread. Also in the nest was a card, which read:

PUDDY BUDDY!

Free trial offer!

Congratulations, you are the lucky recipient of a Puddy Buddy, your personalized, programmable pet!

Constructed from GooCo's patented conduction puddy, your Puddy Buddy is the ideal domestic companion. Have it do your dishes, choreograph a dance routine for it, or simply program it to greet you at the door after a long hard day! The Puddy Buddy is the pet you design for your specific needs! Comes fully charged! (Pinch head to activate.)

Joe lifted the doll from its nest and found it surprisingly heavy. Its surface was smooth and rubbery. He pinched the malleable bulb of its head.

The Puddy Buddy came to life, leaping from Joe's grasp to land on the coffee table. It shook off its serene composure in a series of lifelike stretches and shoulder rolls. Then it promptly stepped out of the nest and dove head-first off the table. The gooey substance of the toy flattened into the floor, spreading wide like a throw rug; then it morphed back into its humanoid shape. It performed a 'ta-dal' jig, arms outstretched.

Joe reached down and pinched its head again, rendering it solid and inert. "Stupid thing," he muttered as he picked it up and tossed it back in its nest.

Joe supervised a de-glassing detail for the Recycle Boston project. It was hard, taxing work, and usually sent him home to his empty apartment exhausted and irritable. Shortly after he got home from work the next day he noticed the Puddy Buddy lying inert in its nest. On a whim he walked over and pinched its head. The Puddy Buddy came to life, performed

its warm-up routine, and proceeded to tumble and flip across the room, as if pleased to have been activated. Joe watched its antics for a while, smiling, before he headed for the bathroom to shower off the day's exertions.

Ten minutes later, shaving at the bathroom mirror, Joe felt a tug at the bottom of the towel he'd wrapped around his waist. He looked down to see the Puddy Buddy. "What do you want?" he asked.

The Puddy Buddy waved a hand, entreating Joe to follow. "I'm shaving," Joe said. "Just a minute."

He went back to what he was doing, only to have his towel yanked off. The Puddy Buddy raced out into the living room with it.

"Hey!" Joe said, irritated. He set down his razor and followed.

The Puddy Buddy led him over to the corner of the room, where his old personal computer sat on a desk, underneath a dust-cover. Joe hadn't used the computer for years; most of his computing needs were covered by his new entertainment console.

But his new pet was now gesturing frantically at the power button.

Joe grabbed his towel. "What, you want me to turn this on?"

The Puddy Buddy nodded assent.

Joe sighed, and sat down at the desk. He removed the dust-cover and booted up the computer.

At this point the Puddy Buddy took over, leaping nimbly to the keyboard. A number of rubbery tentacles extended from its torso and rapidly began keying, connecting the PC to the Internet. Soon, the Puddy Buddy had called up a website on the screen:

INTERPUDDY: The Official Web Page of The Puddy Buddy!

It was an old-fashioned site, colorful, busy with cartoonish Puddy Buddies scrambling all over the screen. Joe watched as his Puddy Buddy lugged the mouse across the pad, clicked a drop-down menu into existence, and stomped on the right button. The screen changed, bringing up the Puddy Buddy Registry Page.

Suddenly Joe found himself absorbed in an old-fashioned web-surf. During the session he named his Puddy Buddy Rufus – rendering him male – and learned that there were hundreds of programs available for download. With a few simple clicks of the mouse (and for a small fee), Puddy Buddies could be programmed for a vast array of user-friendly attributes. Joe studied the options: Slaveboy, Surface Scrubber, Personal Secretary, Puddy-Puppy. You could make your Puddy Buddy a bridge partner, a housecat, a fashion accessory, a neck-brace, or a plumbing snake. The possibilities were endless. Joe studied the descriptions for well over an hour, looking for the perfect

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program. Throughout the session, however, Rufus continually tried to steer the mouse to Full Autonomy. "No way, Rufus," Joe said. "You think I'm nuts?"

The Puddy Buddy went down on one knee and began begging, interlacing dozens of tendril-like fingers in front of him.

"No!"

Dejected, Rufus dropped his head, then glanced back at the screen. Quickly he pointed to Mild Autonomy. Joe read the description of the program, which apparently enabled some small degree of free will into a Puddy Buddy, just enough to render it unpredictable and entertaining. In the end, eyes glazed from staring at the screen, he relented. "Okay, Mild Autonomy it is."

Rufus danced in excitement, then morphed his head into the shape of a computer disk and rammed it into the drive.

After another stint in Boston, Joe came home to the Central Massachusetts Arcology and wound his way through the maze of corridors to his apartment. When he pushed inside, he found the floor of his living room littered with junk. "Damn it, Rufus!"

As the door shut behind him he made his way across the room, studying the complex layout of books, clothes, kitchen utensils, obsolete computer components, food containers, and garbage strewn across his floor. At first he thought Rufus was experimenting with some sort of junk-art, then realized that all the chaff littering the living room floor was precisely arranged, like an obstacle course.

Just then Rufus emerged from the bathroom wearing a gymnastics jumpsuit that appeared to have been sewn together from the shreds of one of Joe's T-shirts. Rufus raised both his arms, as if waving to a crowd, then proceeded to sprint, bound, flip, swing, and thrash his way over the complicated course of obstacles. At the end of his routine, he bounded onto a home-made spatula springboard that launched him end over end toward Joe, who reflexively caught Rufus against his chest.

Rufus's blank-featured face contorted to create lips, and he kissed Joe on the cheek. Then the Puddy Buddy flailed like a fish and thrashed his way to the floor. His rubbery leg appendages windmilled like a cartoon character's, then launched him across the room. He disappeared through the door to the kitchen.

Joe laughed, too tired from work to sustain his anger. If things got out of hand, he could always reprogram Rufus. With that thought, he glanced over at his PC, only to notice that it was turned on, a starfield screensaver active on its monitor. Had he left it on the other night? *Something tells me*, he thought, *I should have read the fine print on Mild Autonomy.*

Later that night, lying in bed, Joe had an erotic dream. He looked down in a bleary-eyed stupor to see a beautiful, tiny woman straddling him. The sight disturbed him – it felt wrong to be having sex with a person so small – yet he could not deny the responses of his body. This gorgeous, tiny vision working herself up and down on his erection, a perfect fit . . .

He ejaculated, and the woman split in half.

His heart hammered in his chest as he came fully awake, realizing suddenly that it was no dream, no woman – it had been Rufus in drag, or in female form at any rate, having morphed his (her) body. Joe's ejaculation had triggered something in Rufus's programming, and had splintered the Puddy Buddy into two separate puddles of slick goop, which bubbled and slurped on either side of him. "Bed table lamp!" he said, and the light came on, illuminating the odd, sheet-staining

formation of two half-sized Puddy Buddies on either side of him on the bed. One male, one female, becoming more human and lifelike as he watched, the puddy coagulating in all the right places. Joe noticed the male one looked just like the old Rufus. Once both of them were up and on their feet, they both waved frantic, rubbery arms at Joe and bounded off the bed, racing into the other room.

Joe blinked, then rested his head back on his pillow. His last, horrifying thought before he drifted back to sleep was that Mild Autonomy had given Rufus just enough free will to download his own programming.

Rufus and his wife Ruthie started a family during one of Joe's absences, a few days later. When he got home he found five mini-Buddies racing all over the living room. They had built a house in the bookshelf by the windows, using perfectly cleft quasewood strips that had been chopped free of the bedroom wall. *Holy shit*, Joe thought. *They can reproduce without me!* "Rufus!" he yelled, stomping over to the PC. It was time to put a stop to this.

He logged onto the Puddy Buddy website to download a control program. Clearly the best option was Slaveboy. He could get Rufus and his family to clean up the mess they had made, repair his wall and straighten up the place, maybe even fuse themselves back into one Puddy Buddy. He saw the price: ten times as expensive as Mild Autonomy. "Now I see how this works," he said, grudgingly authorizing the transaction. "Rufus! Get in here!"

Rufus and his family emerged from their crude little home, gathering on the bookshelf.

"Rufus, come here! Bring the wife and kids!"

Rufus seemed to think about it, then shook his head.

"What? Come on, now, I'm going to give you a new program!"

Rufus shook his head again.

Joe could no longer contain his impatience. "Get over here, you!" he shouted, and launched himself across the room to grab them. The Puddy Buddies scrambled to evade him, but he caught one – Ruthie, he thought – cleanly with his outstretched hands. Before he could squash her head, however, she slithered away neatly and squirted under the couch. Joe bent down to chase her, but was distracted by two of Rufus's offspring, who bounced up his back. One of them had morphed into a flyswatter shape, and the other wielded the first, whacking Joe on the back of the head repeatedly. He swatted at them but they were too quick. Then Rufus suddenly appeared below him, and Joe promptly squashed him with a foot. The goop slurped out from under Joe's shoe and Rufus reformed, then cartwheeled his way into the other room.

Joe slumped onto the couch, defeated. The Puddy Buddies had taken over.

"Hi, I'm your next door neighbor," the woman at the door said.

Joe blinked at her. She was a complete stranger. Even in an arcology, where people lived literally on top of one another, there was little human contact. "Hi, I'm Joe," he said. "What can I do for you, miz . . . ?"

"It's the walls," the woman said.

"Yes?"

"The walls are . . . chittering."

"Chittering?" Joe shook his head. "I'm sorry?"

"I hear them chittering in the night. As if they are, well, infested. Now we know it can't be insects."

"We do?"

"Please tell me I'm not hallucinating," the woman said.
"Tell me that you, too, have heard the *chittering*."

Joe shook his head. "Uh, not really," he said.

"I see," the woman said, in a tone that suggested that she certainly did not. "Well, if this *chittering* continues, I'll just have to put in a call to the building manager."

"I suppose that would be the thing to do," Joe said, relieved. It would be months before anybody got up here to deal with the problem. "A pleasure to meet you, miz . . . ma'am."

The woman smiled tartly and shuffled back to her apartment.

Joe shut the door, and glanced behind him. The peebees, which was what he had started to call them, had stopped in their tracks when he'd gone to answer the door. But now that his neighbor was gone, they sprang back into action. All several thousand of them.

Scrambling back and forth, the peebees were rather insect-like, skittering all over the place, carrying and building. Exposure to solar energy kept them fully charged. Therefore the peebees had started their cities near the living room and kitchen windows, where they could more easily absorb sunlight. Their homes were converted cups and saucers, or tiny origami huts, or hollowed-out hardcover novels, or toothpick A-frames. When the windows became over-populated, pockets of Puddy Buddy society had migrated to wall outlets. They recharged by plugging their heads into the sockets.

Joe returned to the couch, squashing peebees as he went, and sat down heavily. *Chittering in the walls*, he mused. They were mining for power cords. Just like the ambitious bunch living in his cereal cupboard, who were chiseling holes in an outside wall for the southern exposure. The peebees craved electricity, and would stop at nothing to get it.

The whole business reminded him of a math problem from college. It had been one of the few problems he'd understood from a class that involved, as far as he could discern, the unfathomable thought processes of mathematicians. The teacher had explained that if a man walked halfway to somewhere, and then walked halfway again, and then halfway again, the man, technically, would never reach his destination. Once you were halfway there, you could always take whatever distance remained and cut it in half. It had something to do with infinity, or something. Joe had never finished his degree.

That problem reminded him of the peebees, because after engaging for some reason in mock human sex, they reproduced by splitting in half. And while it appeared each peebee's mass would continue to decrease, as they continued to get smaller and less dense, their number seemed limitless. In the end, an infinite number of microscopic peebees might layer every surface of the apartment like shed derma, and Joe would never see them.

He hoped that would happen soon, but there was still plenty of transition time left. And the peebees had acquired more raw material by plundering smart-gelatin from his pillows and mattress and sneakers. Hybridizing it with conduction puddy, they had bolstered their collective mass. It was only a matter of time before they burrowed into the neighboring apartments.

The phone rang. Joe summoned it with a quick shout. The receiver raced across the coffee table to him, dodging peebees attempting to scavenge its battery pack. The phone had been on the run for days. "Hello?"

"Joseph Average? It's Leo Molinari, how's it going?"

"Mr Molinari!" Joe said, suddenly filled with nervous energy. Mr Molinari was the executive supervisor of the Recycle

America project, headquartered in Cheyenne, Wyoming. He was the big cheese, the boss of the boss who bossed his boss's boss. You didn't get much higher than Leo Molinari. "To what do I owe this . . . phone call?"

"I'm just going through my daily paces, Joe. This is a busy industry, full of problems and headaches, and I have to say I'm disappointed in you."

"Disappointed?" Joe said, swallowing nervously.

"You were de-glassing supervisor of the month not two months ago, Joe, and now I'm finding reports on my desk that your productivity has plunged over the last two weeks. Is this how you repay the project after your pay raise?"

"I'm . . . sorry, sir," Joe said. "I didn't realize we were falling so far behind."

"What's going on, there?"

"Well, I am having some problems at home . . ."

"Well straighten them out, son!" Leo said. "You're one of the highest paid team supervisors on the east coast. I know it's no skin off your ass, but when these figures are released your peers are going to fall all over each other to dump it in the regional director's lap, and at that point, I can't help you!"

"I appreciate your taking an interest, sir . . ."

"No problem. It's my job, I take it seriously. You'd do well to follow my example. Now I've got things to do –"

He disconnected, and Joe said goodbye into a dead phone, shaken. Before he could even set down the phone, a swarm of peebees had snatched it out of his hand and hauled it away like picnic ants making off with a sandwich. "Hey!" Joe said, but already they were dismantling the receiver and pilfering the battery.

Furious, Joe stood up and started stomping on them, but they squirted out from under his shoes, unharmed. He gave up the fight, slumped back in his chair, and watched the peebees continue on their industrious way. Slowly, surely, dismantling his apartment for their own selfish purposes . . .

And then, a revelation, as he began to watch and learn.

A creepy, metallic groan sounded in the night, waking Joe from deep slumber. He had retired after a particularly harsh stint on the job, and had been asleep for hours, so it was not an easy awakening. Peebees were crawling across the mosquito-netting over his face, obscuring his vision. "Ceiling lights!" he called, and the room lit up. He swept the bothersome peebees from his face and looked around, trying to locate the source of the noise.

The peebees layered everything. Many of them were inert, conserving energy until they could reload with solar power, but others – those privileged peebees who were in with the wall outlet mafia – were racing about excitedly. It was business as usual for the peebees, and were it not for the mysterious groan, Joe would have gone back to bed. There was another long, hard day ahead at the deconstruction site, but productivity was improving, thanks to his intense study of the peebees.

But there was something unnerving about that noise . . .

He pushed the mosquito-netting away and rubbed the sleep-dirt from his eyes. Perhaps, he thought, I merely imagined the noise. It was hard to believe, however. These days, he was too tired post-shift to worry about the peebees or the apartment.

He had work to do, bills to pay, money to make.

Another metallic groan, followed by a crack and a screech.

Joe sat up quickly. The peebees stopped momentarily to look around, then went about their business. "What's going on?" Joe said. But the apartment did not answer; the wall-mining

peebees had disabled the home system and reprogrammed it for their own mysterious purposes.

Joe pulled the bedcovers aside, sending dozens of peebees flying, and swung his legs to the floor. When he stood up, the floor felt wobbly beneath his feet. A low-pitched, keening howl from underneath him, which Joe recognized from his experience onsite as a stressed super-plastic I-beam support. This was no hallucination; the structural integrity of the apartment had been compromised. He had to get out.

Blithely the peebees went about their business, as Joe tiptoed across the noisy, creaky floor. Each new sound caused hundreds of peebees to look up, or down, or shrug, or shake their heads. But when Joe reached the doorway to the living room and his foot shot through the carpet, dozens of peebees plunged through the hole, and those nearby scrambled away from the area.

Gingerly, Joe extricated his foot from the floor, and held onto the doorframe tightly as he made his way to the living room just in time for half of the ceiling to collapse. Plaster and shattered super-plastic rained down, followed by a recliner which contained an upstairs neighbor Joe had never met. There was just enough time for the befuddled man sitting in the chair to meet Joe's eye before the floor opened up and swallowed him whole. Thousands of peebees plunged in after him.

His new phone rang. "Phone!" Joe called, then realized it was taped to his abdomen underneath his pajamas to protect it from the peebees. "Hello?"

"What's going on up there, 85X!" The superintendent.

"The apartment is . . ."

Another ceiling came down, another startled neighbor plunged past and crashed through the floor. Joe huddled in the comparable safety of the doorway, heart thumping.

"What? The apartment is what?"

"Falling apart!" Joe said, shifting his weight from one leg to another. It was a mistake.

The floor gave way and Joe went through it like a clumsy paratrooper. Like so many other disasters Joe had experienced, it happened so fast it felt like slow motion. He was able to watch with perfect clarity as tens of thousands of peebees fell around

him, realistic miniature humanoid lifeforms clinging to each other as if for dear life. They seemed as surprised as Joe.

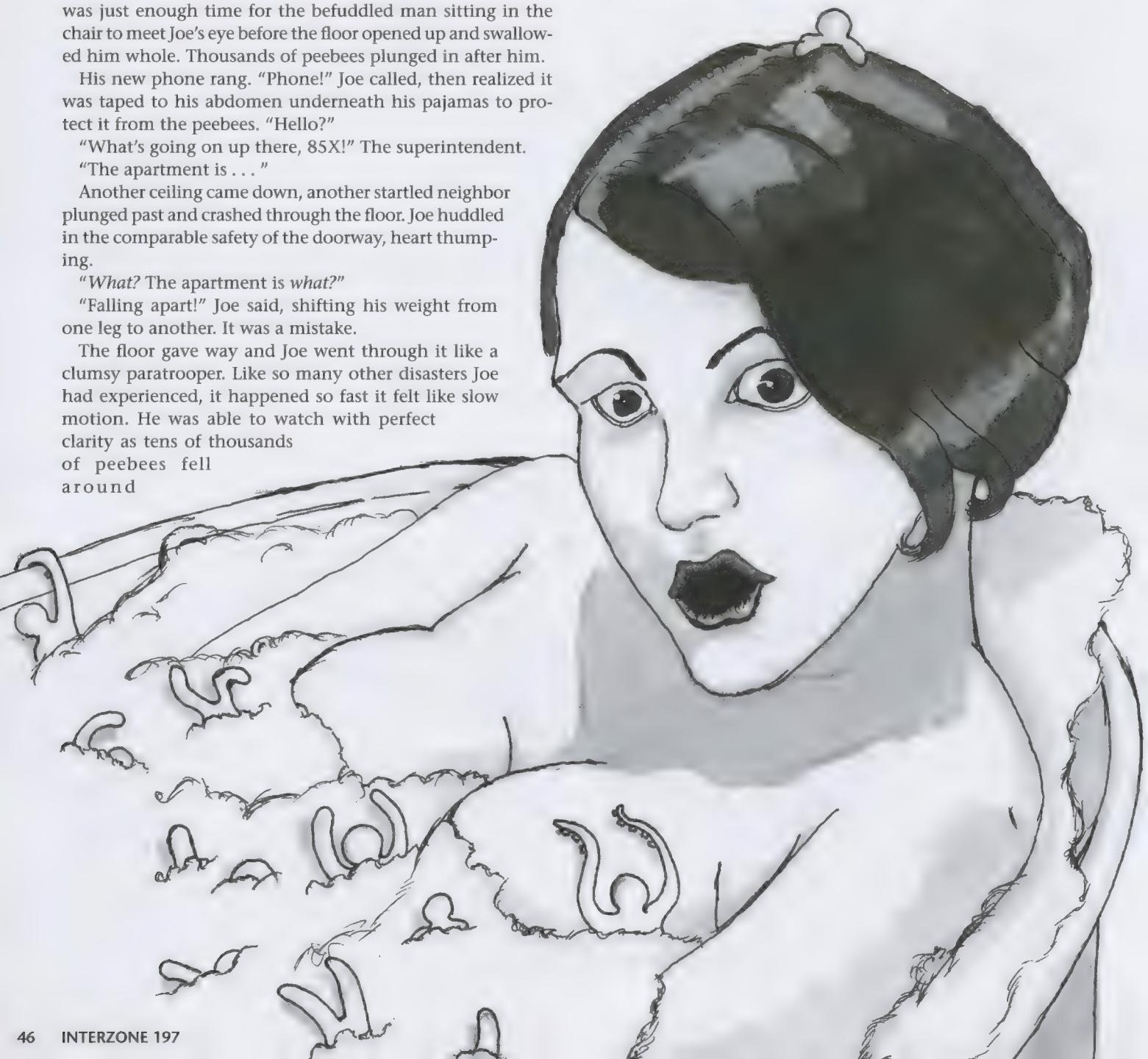
And then, just like that, the moment was over and Joe found himself crashing into a tub of hot, soapy water, smacking his head on the porcelain. The rain of peebees and dust and plastic settled as Joe pulled his head out of the water, spitting plaster chips and animated conduction puddy from his mouth, then gasping violently.

He was in a bathtub – a highly *illegal* bathtub under the Water Abuse laws – currently occupied by a rather stunned-looking young woman with laminated blonde hair and an involuntarily extinguished cigarette dangling from her lips. She paid Joe no attention, however; she was glancing down in awe at the layer of drowning peebees that covered the bubbly surface, struggling to swim for safety.

From underneath the water a gurgling ring sounded, and Joe felt around down there, looking for his phone. The woman barely flinched when Joe mistook her knobby knee for the receiver, preoccupied with slapping peebees out of her vicinity.

He found the phone and brought it to his ear. "Yes?"

"Apartment 85X!"



"Yes?"

"You said the apartment was falling apart?"

"Yes, that's right!"

"Why? How?"

Joe stammered something unintelligible, then realized he had nothing to say, no way to explain himself. He turned off the phone and launched it into the nearby dry-toilet.

There was a vast stretch of firebombed and bullet-riddled no-man's-land between the police line and the Central Massachusetts Arcology. Shortly after the building's evacuation, the place had been set upon by law enforcement officials, emergency crews, military teams, government agents, and scientists, all with conflicting theories on how to eradicate the peebee menace. So far, their every attempt to wipe out the peebees had failed. Ruthless, cunning, stubborn, and resourceful, the Puddy Buddies were determined not only to stand their ground, but to expand their territory. The war between humanity and the peebees had been waging for weeks, with no end in sight.

Joe stood staring across the open space, dressed in blue jeans and a black jacket, holding a white flag. He'd seen the morning news download, a picture of him with a baffled look on his face and a nasty bruise on his forehead. The caption read 'Humanity's Last Hope?' At first he'd burst into hysterics; later, he'd vomited.

Standing beside him was Leo Molinari. Short, wide, and primly tailored, he looked surprisingly calm, and telegenic as all getout. The nearby cluster of important suits and uniforms had given them a moment alone before the big event.

"I want you to know that the Recycle America project is proceeding way ahead of schedule, thanks to you, Joe," Leo said. "Your new methods may well have saved the country millions of man-hours in deconstruction labor, not to mention all the resources we're salvaging from our drowning cities. You're an inspiration to us all!"

"I was just watching the peebees . . ."

"But it's all for shit if this doesn't work."

"I know, sir."

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," Leo said, putting his arm around Joe's shoulders and walking out into the no-man's-land with him. "It could have happened to anybody. An accident of fate."

Joe swallowed.

"But let me tell you this, if you pull it off, you will be a worldwide hero," Leo said. "And there's no reason the plan shouldn't work. The best minds in America have put together the most persuasive argument possible. All you need to do is deliver it. The logic is obvious. They're sure to agree."

"I understand the plan, sir," Joe said. "I think I just want to get it over with."

"Very well, son." Leo shook his hand firmly, smiling politically. "Don't flub it." He turned back and strolled away.

Joe glanced back at the huddled masses, imagining what he must look like on screens all across the world. Then he turned around and started out across the field, waving the white flag.

The arcology was the same behemoth it always had been, except for the hole in it that had been his apartment, and the fact that it was infested with weird little beings of some unfathomable origin, and that everywhere was evidence of the guerilla warfare that had taken place within its walls, halls, and rooms. Piles of rubble and junk littered the base of the building, and in the distance, standing atop a pile of rock, he saw another white flag, this one composed of conduction puddy, several fused peebees being whipped around by a

cluster of individuals. Joe made his way over to them.

About ten feet away, he stopped.

There stood Rufus.

"Hey, Rufus," Joe said conversationally. "What's up?"

Rufus shrugged his rubbery shoulders.

"You wouldn't want to give up, would you?" Joe asked, smiling.

Rufus cocked an 'eyebrow', then started to shake as with laughter, eventually curling into a ball and rolling on the ground.

"All right, all right," Joe said. "I didn't think so. That's why we brought this." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the palm computer.

Rufus settled down, then morphed himself briefly into a question mark.

"It's a plan," Joe said. "To provide you with all the energy you'll ever need – you and your entire race. Just slot into the jack, and you'll have the ultimate answer."

Rufus crossed his arms, shook his head.

"It's not a virus, I promise," Joe assured him.

Rufus paused for a moment, as if to consider this, then pointed at a nearby peebee authoritatively. The other peebee began to quiver, and they argued in mime for a few seconds before finally the cowed subordinate slithered across the rubble to jack into the computer's data port.

Joe triggered the download. He didn't know the exact details of the plan, just the basic gist – something about the construction of a ship for the peebees and sending them out into space, where they would have all the universe's resources at their disposal, as much energy as they could ever want. The world's best programmers would provide the peebees with skill downloads, so that they would be capable of manning the ship and harvesting solar energy and whatever elements they needed to feed their lust for electricity. They would find, out there, an embarrassment of riches.

The peebee unmorphed himself from the data port and raced over to Rufus, where he proceeded to merge a section of his head with Rufus's, transmitting the information. Joe waited, feeling the cameras on his back, and tried to maintain his posture, knowing that the world was watching. Hoping.

Rufus listened carefully, a crease of a grin forming on his featureless face. He shook his head, amused, and dismissed his aide with a wave of his hand.

"What do you think, Rufus?" Joe asked.

Rufus strolled dramatically across the battlefield to the palm computer. There he unzipped a figurative fly, released a grotesque phallic tentacle of conduction puddy from his nether region, and typed a rapid message on the keypad. Finished, he reeled in his elastic member and strutted away, signaling instructions to his flunkies as he went. Quickly they disappeared into the building.

Abandoned, Joe bent down and picked up the palm computer. Onto its screen had been typed the message:

YOU JUST DON'T GET THE POINT, DO YOU?

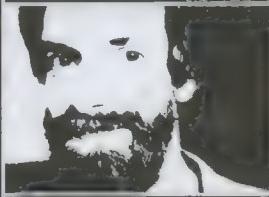
Joseph Average thought about it for a second. "I guess not," he said, and made his way back toward humanity with the message, hoping somebody else could make sense of it.

Chris has had stories published in *The 3rd Alternative*, *Talebones, Say...*, *Tales of the Unanticipated* and elsewhere. A number of his short-fiction reviews can be found at *Tangent Online* (www.tangentonline.com), and he is currently the fiction editor for *Futuristic* (www.futuristic.com). He lives in Iowa.



TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE EXUBERANTLY INVERTS THE HALF-TERM MODEL

RICK LOWE



MUTANT POPCORN

FILM REVIEWS

here is a season between: a brief but semipernicious sodden midwinter spring when strange things creep out unseen by the waking world. They are abroad only by day; when darkness falls, they melt back into invisibility and leave the night to its business. Only the children have glimpsed these uneasy half-formed creatures, though an occasional accompanying au pair or divorced dad has witnessed their passage without comprehension. Those who have seen know this liminal season as 'half-term': a crepuscular time when the multiplicities are briefly filled with parties of twenty preschoolers wrangled by one struggling adult, and blink-and-miss films like *Laura's Star* or mayfly-lived

queer icon *The Spongebob Squarepants Movie*. For most of us, these films do not exist. They are not the family films of the seasons we know, the Pixars and the Lemony Snickets, but something altogether stranger: films that for one or another reason can only slip out to do their business in this twilight time between the seasons we know.

Now, normal family films are pure evil. I pretty much stopped taking my children to the cinema after *Finding Nemo*, a truly vile manifestation of Hollywood's serial vice of disappearing the mom and perverting all family life into a master narrative of fathers and sons. (You try explaining to a five-year-old what happened to the fish's mummy in the opening sequence, and how the rest of the film is somehow

supposed to make it better.) The gratuitous manipulation of young children's deepest emotional vulnerabilities is one of the most loathsome things about popular cinema, and future generations will look at this stuff with the same bewilderment they experience over our scopophilic fixations with ludicrous sex and casually horrific violence.

And the films of half-term are like this, only *stranger*. A mesmerising case in point is *Son of the Mask*, a film I doubt has been willingly seen by any adult, but which efficiently encapsulates a whole encyclopaedia of the things that make post-millennial Hollywood such a messed-up space of the head. In a time of cross-media

Son of the Mask, a film I doubt has been willingly seen by any adult, but which efficiently encapsulates a whole encyclopaedia of the things that make post-millennial Hollywood such a messed-up space of the head



that's where the demographic has headed. Failure to get a timely sequel package together left the original film to decay into a half-life on video for an increasingly juvenile audience who mainly like stuff like the (still brilliant) bit where Milo the dog dons the Mask and becomes the Tex Avery creature from hell. So if you want to get a sequel out ten years down the line, you need to realign your guns at where the target audience has moved to. All of which is why in *Son*, Alan Cummings' Loki (the Mask's original occupant, as I for one had forgotten) is recharacterised in the opening expologue as a hyperactive youngster: "His mischievous pranks were a constant source of annoyance to his siblings; he was the original bratty little brother . . . Loki was such an unruly child that Odin eventually locked him up in chains far beneath the earth."

Even with this, *Son of the Mask* is a film so nervous it you can feel it quaking. One of those films for which all human pain consists of versions of Hollywood creative panic, its busy

before Odinn the all-father disowns him as a disappointment, we're all set to cue up the *Cat in the Hat* remix as dad/son bonding ritual before mother gets home to find the house totalled and the family gone nukular.

And the most astonishing scene in this desperate plea for attention is the final faceoff, where the supertyke's natural and foster dads abandon their sfx stunt duel to 'let the kid decide' which parent to adopt. It's all very Hollywood to feign leaving the choice of ending to the market, but the thing that really plunges your jaw into your popcorn bucket is that the female parent is in full view at her husband's side throughout this scene – yet mommy is *not even an option* in the final choice, despite being the one figure with whom the child has bonded from the start. When Tim opines "There's nothing more important than your family," what he means is "There's nothing more important than fathers and sons." Loki's own dysfunctionality, and by extension the presence of chaos in the world, is the product of



greed where the most highly-valued creative property is a living franchise, *Son of the Mask* is a grimly determined attempt to resurrect an extinct property for a demographic that wasn't even born at the time of the first feature. Those with memories long enough to remember *Mask* before it was a movie will recall that the original Dark Horse comic was a pretty dark and savage creation before Hollywood mercilessly sanitised it for the mass audience in 1994. Even so, the idea that ten years down the line the franchise would be a vehicle for kiddie-oriented entertainment about suburban family values would have been had its first-generation fans spluttering thickshake.

Nevertheless, the cruel truth is that

story centres on 'Tim Avery', wannabe animator and husband to a better-paid better half whose ovaries are starting to ping. But creatively-blocked Tim burns to come up with the killer franchise product that will make him rich and his future family proud of him – ambitions which get in a twist when he inadvertently fathers a pagan demigod by inseminating Mrs Tim while possessed by the Mask of Loki. As usual when your unplanned child is the Antichrist, hilarity and mayhem ensue – abetted by the family dog (now 'Otis' – get?), who resents the newcomer and awaits his own chance to Mask up and Scratchy his Itchy. When mom's out of town for the whole middle act, *but* Loki is in town instead looking for his Mask back

Those with memories long enough to remember Mask before it was a movie will recall that the original Dark Horse comic was a pretty dark and savage creation before Hollywood mercilessly sanitised it for the mass audience in 1994

sibling anxiety and failure in the competition for dad's attention: "I'm not Thor," says Loki to Odin. "I'm never going to be like Thor. Can't you just love me for who I am?" And with his own familial anxiety healed, Tim's creative id reintegrates across that pesky corpus callosum, and he pitches and wins his cartoon franchise to an exultant studio boss. "A baby and a dog competing for dad's attention! I love it! Where did you get the idea?" Offscreen, fingers pinch nostrils – as well they might, to judge from the clip of the pilot. Still, perhaps now the makers of the film itself will be spending more time with their families.

But there's an even more bizarre ritual of franchise reanimation in the seasonette's strangest offering of all. First, imagine *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson version, not JRRT). Then, imagine it restaged as a cg animation for the preschool audience. Then, substitute the members of the Fellowship with the cast of ***The Magic Roundabout***. What, you

wonder, was in that diet drink, and how many swigs did you take? But rub your eyes, and it's still there: Dougal as Frodo, Zebedee as Gandalf, and a quest to thwart Zeb's fallen-Maiar nemesis by casting the ornament of power into its destined place before he can use it to cast the world into darkness. As the McKellen-voiced Zebedee instructs his team, the plot is structured on the classical armature of a preschool learning adventure: "Only by returning the three enchanted diamonds to their original places on the roundabout can you defeat Zeebad; but if you fail he will FREEZE THE SUN!" And the ensuing quest leads through thinly-disguised replays of Caradhras, the mines of Moria, and no fewer than four versions of the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, in the first of which in particular the throat constricts in a familiar way as we hear Gandalf's own voice calling "Run! Run!" (preschool for "Fly, you fools!") before he plummets into the abyss and the increasingly Frodo-esque Dougal cries "Nooooooooo!" Dylan's comment here is telling: "Zeb's dead, baby. Zeb's

In this version, the ***Roundabout's*** seemingly perpetual childhood summer, with parent-demiurge Zebedee off-set but available on call, is revealed the hard-won fruit of an ancient war between good and evil, with global catastrophe threatening whenever the fragile defences against the ancient powers buckle



The Magic Roundabout is a very strange film, a freakish mouton anglo-français with a deep identity problem rooted in its original channel-straddling status as a franchise planted in two very different narrative cultures

dead." Like the *LotR* palimpsesting, it's an uncomfortable hommage, because it comes not as a simple ironic nudge for the slim benefit of accompanying adults, but at a genuinely charged emotional moment in the plot, of a kind where spot-the-intertext games are normally excluded.

But then *The Magic Roundabout* is a very strange film, a freakish *mouton anglo-français* with a deep identity problem rooted in its original channel-straddling status as a franchise planted in two very different narrative cultures and very differently soundtracked in each. Its Euroland setting is charmingly evoked by Franglais text signs like 'Opera Concert' and 'Candy Bonbon'; but a lot of the time the dialogue seems to have been written to

be rewritten in another language, recalling nothing so much as one of those Francophone early-learning computer games that sound and feel subtly alien in their English redubs. There are a lot of very weak lines in the English version, though it's hard to fault the voice talent's attempts to overcome them – with even Robbie Williams surprisingly Thompsonesque and effective as Dougal – and the design and storyboarding are often inspired. (I assume that's the Rodney Matthews in the credits.) The character animation is strong, too, cleverly recreating original stop-motion quirks of character movement like Ermintrude's all-from-the-neck head gestures and Dougal's hovercraft turns on a sixpence. But the plot, and what

it does with the *Roundabout* mythology of old, is unsettlingly dark from the opening dream-sequence (first, as it happens, of an overgenerous three). In this version, the Roundabout's seemingly perpetual childhood summer, with parent-demiurge Zebedee off-set but available on call, is revealed the hard-won fruit of an ancient war between good and evil, with global catastrophe threatening whenever the fragile defences against the ancient powers buckle. It's pretty strong stuff for *The Magic Roundabout*, and I suspect says less about darkening notions of childhood innocence than about dispiriting European submission to the Hollywood dogma that young children need to be terrified out of their wits and constantly reminded that there are bad people out there who want nothing more than to turn their playground into a frozen wasteland.

That, of course, is precisely the new geopolitical vision so joyously celebrated by **Team America: World Police**, which exuberantly inverts the



half-term model by using the nostalgic childhood imagery of ancient puppet shows to infantilise adult themes for an adults-only certificate. Between its US release pre-election and its UK appearance post-inauguration, *Team America* has become a different and perhaps a better film, its even-handed swipes at neocon and Hollywood-liberal stances reading now like a fairly accurate reading of a divided nation's mood, rather than the weaselly nihilistic evasion of choice for which it was rebuked at home.

How sharp you find the satire depends on how you feel on being hit repeatedly by a club studded with razorblades, and how much you laugh will depend on your taste for an old-school *Viz*-style mix of high deadpan

Team America: World Police exuberantly inverts the half-term model by using the nostalgic childhood imagery of ancient puppet shows to infantilise adult themes for an adults-only certificate

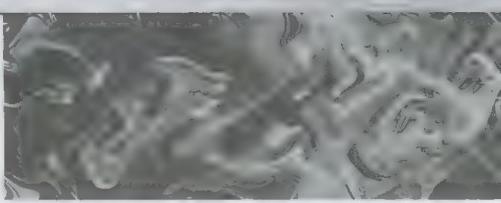


and gross-out schoolboy muckiness. But on any reading it's an astonishing highwire act, recreating the lost art of supermarionation in loving detail simply to get at the treasures of resonance it carries: nostalgia for a time of simpler narratives and a simpler palette of emotions; action-film solutions to global problems; white boys' toys as the tools of ordering the world; a lost golden age of covert operations against international supervillains who could actually play the part. If nothing else, it's technically brilliant, with subtle refinements to the puppets' facials allowing an uncannily actorly range of tiny adjustments around the eyes, yet without departing so far from the Anderson model as to stop it looking

like the real thing. (Only "giant socialist weasel" suicide bomber Michael Moore is a bit too *Spitting Image* to fit.)

As with *South Park*'s cutouts, the choice of a minimally expressive figurative medium and mostly in-house character voices throws a dangerous weight of responsibility on the writing; and much of *Team America*'s running time is shadowed by worry over how long they can maintain the conceit, the narrative momentum, and the quality of gags against the looming challenge of a grand action-comedy finale. The kamikaze solution, to load everything on to a single show-stopping monologue, is a gesture of

breathtaking chutzpah; but Parker & Stone by now know gold when they've minted it, and both of the "dicks, pussies, and assholes" speeches are sure to be frat-house standards for a generation, long after Sean Penn and the house of Bush alike are history's dust. Even the songs are mostly good enough to sustain a second visit in the brash end-title megamix, and the merciless deconstruction of the poetics of action cinema is pretty well faultless. If a few gags fail to detonate, it's still an impressive inauguration address that strips down the emotional rhetoric of the war on terror to its infantile essentials of male rape and pathic liberalism. The whole world will need its wisdom to get it through the term. X



KIVAM by DAVE HOING



In Echoes it's not the cold you notice first, although it *is* cold, nor the brevity of sunshine nor the wind nor the incessant blizzards that keen off the Gymrin Hills and hammer snow against the windowless geometry of concrete buildings. No, it's the still times when the mists lay upon the city, coating every surface in a glittery patina of ice. It's the aura on the horizon when a distant coach lantern illuminates the mist from behind a hill. It's the feeling of both comfort and loneliness you get as that mist enfolds you, obscuring your line of sight in every direction but up. There's a gap above, an opening through which brilliant stars give light but no heat, beauty but no glimmer of hope.

My name is Kivam. Some think me as lovely as those stars. Perhaps they're right, as my work requires me to exploit my physical attributes in service to our city.

Echoes is nestled in the northeast corner of the continent of Arra, a mining town now bereft of ore. Drun were brought in as slaves decades ago to excavate the tunnels for us. This must have made sense at the time: with their stocky, compact bodies, their muscular backs and arms and shoulders, and their Fever-ravaged brains, Drun seemed perfectly suited for manual labor, and little else – much more than we delicate Lyhians. So, clandestinely acceding to the wishes of the mining companies, the Council of the Twelve in Hoxa temporarily lifted its injunction against Drun in Arra. On ships and overland caravans the poor things came in chains, prodded with whips and curses; and at the end of that terrible journey, they were forced to carve holes in frozen earth and hack ore from the walls; and when the work was done the survivors were supposed to be sent back to Drunland. Instead, as a cost-cutting measure, the companies simply sealed them into the barren tunnels and left them to die. *How horrible*, the executives reasoned, *to be a Drun. Surely they're better off dead.*

The Council did not object.

The Drun did. Perhaps they were too stubborn to die, or simply too stupid, but years of scrounging and breeding and brooding have finally brought them to the surface, erupting through secret cracks in the world like a lanced infection. That's why Echoes is in the state it is today, why the remarkable Drun woman Dritte holds our city; why we now anxiously await the army that marches, belatedly, from Hoxa to take it back.

Not that I'm complaining, as I recline on a sumptuous mattress, reveling in the soft glow of Dritte's chamber. Her boudoir is a luxury of wood in a world of ice: paneling, doors, bedposts, dresser, chairs . . . all done in mahogany, teak, or oak. She has a window of real glass, frosted over in lovely geometric patterns. Heat streams from an elaborately latticed radiator. More impressively, she also has, trimming her walls, window, and doorway, an astonishing substance known as biolight wood. Biolight is a true wood, but it possesses a property unlike any other. Fluorescent sap pulses through it like capillaries of light, producing a cool and smokeless source of illumination. Dritte imports it from Drunland, where forests of the stuff blanket the interior of the continent. The rest of Arra knows nothing of biolight; if it did, the economic potential alone would demand the Council's attention.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID SENECAL

Dritte has taken for herself the very best Echoes has to offer, which is her right: one Drun out of ten thousand is spared the ravages of the Fever as a teenager, and Dritte is that one; the woman whose *will*, for lack of a better word, was strong enough to bind the damaged minds of her people and propel them into rebellion; the leader who has transformed Echoes into a Drun enclave.

Dritte is my mistress, my friend, and my employer. I'm a Lyhian, yes, but I've chosen to go where the power is, and right now the power is with Dritte. I have many duties that require travel, but here in Echoes she uses me as an ornamental mouthpiece at official functions, a pretty face to make gentle the harsh words she sometimes has to say to her new Lyhian subjects. It's not that she's ugly; she may be as attractive to her kind as I am to mine. But she does share the form of her fellow Drun, and her teeth are too widely spaced, and her middle years have pressed wrinkles and creases into her leathery skin, which only enhances her grotesquery in the eyes of Lyhians.

She is dressing now, watching herself in the large mirror attached at the back of her oaken dresser. Muscles ripple across her broad shoulders and back, and her short legs are knotted like the tree trunks we in Echoes see only in picture books. In a Lyhian woman a body like hers would be hideous and unbecoming – and I wonder, as she gazes at the glass, what does she see? I'm in the reflection, too, of course. Does she compare my smooth white complexion with her own rough and ruddy skin? Does she look at her flat, shapeless chest and long for firm breasts like mine? Has she, in the end, been indoctrinated by so much Lyhian repugnance that she's come to loathe her own image?

I know she desires me; but does she envy me?

"Why would I?" she asks, as if hearing my thoughts – no, not *as if*, for she *does* hear them. She hears everyone's. She hears, and she *compels*. That's what makes her so formidable; that's what will turn the Council's army against itself. "And what makes you think I desire you," she continues, "more than anybody else? You're a bauble, too insignificant to envy. Truthfully, Lyhian beauty is only useful to, and against, other Lyhians. Your primary function is to seduce who I need seduced –"

"Including yourself?" I say coyly, for I know it's true. Even the tendrils of her mind don't stretch forever, so when the situation warrants she dispatches me to 'influence' the actions of important men, and sometimes women, in Hoxa. My most recent assignment, nearly a year ago now, was to convert the army's crowmaster to Dritte's cause – before the Council even knew they were going to *need* an army. It was a brilliant plan, and it worked. Sex for fun is great and sex for love better still, but sex for a higher purpose is the ultimate satisfaction. I'm good at my job, and while I'm doing it I never have to fake

my enjoyment. Any of Dritte's female Lyhian collaborators – and there are others, a few – could solicit favors, loyalty, and treason for her, but she has a special affinity for me, which accounts for my presence on her bed, and for my life of comfort and luxury and heat in this frigid city.

"Well, why not?" she smiles, pulling a brown woolen tunic over incongruously delicate undergarments. "We all have our petty amusements. And remember, what I give I can take away. So don't get smug."

I toss back my blonde hair and pout the way she likes me to, and she laughs. Drun laughter is an unsettling sound, a cross between a cough, a hiss, and embers popping in a fire. Dritte studies me in the mirror, and suddenly she's somber again. "I got a messenger bird today. Put some clothes on and meet me in the war chamber. We've plans to make."

Before I can object that I have or want nothing to do with battle strategies, she stalks out of the room, slouching and shambling as only a Drun can.

I keep several sets of clothes in Dritte's closets. Tonight I choose a black satin blouse and matching slacks, leather boots, and a black fur-lined jacket with white dress gloves. It's conservative, I know, but what does one wear to a war council? No matter that this outfit isn't warm enough to travel any distance outside; the Drun have cleared more tunnels under the city to serve as walkways.

Truth to be told, I'm in no hurry to attend Dritte's meeting, and I *certainly* don't want to arrive there ahead of her. So I wait. Her window overlooks the plaza of Echoes' town square. To darken the room I pull narrow shutters over the biolight trim. Then I exhale on the glass to thaw a circle in the frost. From my position high in milady Dritte's boudoir, I gaze out upon the place of my birth.

Several Drun and Lyhians scuttle along scrupulously shoveled streets, going about their business and pointedly ignoring each other.

A pair of winterhawks screech into the night as they swoop across the tops of buildings hunting for sparrows or rodents to eat.

The flames of countless street lamps mirror in the stars, which burn coldly in an unusually clear sky. There's no mist tonight, and I can see a great distance, to the horizon, where the stars wink out behind the Gymrin Hills.

Now that the iron ore is gone, there is, to all appearances, nothing in Echoes, *nothing*, that any rational person who doesn't already live here could possibly want. No tree or plant grows, no fruits or vegetables or flowers, not so much as a single blade of grass. The sky is occasionally blue and the sun, in its brief appearances, a hazy yellow/brown; otherwise, the

To most of the people in Arra, the question is not so much why the Council waited so long to send an army to 'rescue' Echoes, but why it's sending one at all

only colors are the blacks, grays and whites of the landscape during the day; blacks, grays, and blues at night; the fires of street lamps; and the various dyes in our woolen clothing. With so little sun, Lyhian skin is pale – pallid, almost sickly, according to acquaintances in the south – and our hair is almost always blonde. Even we are colorless.

And the weather . . . well. At least it never rains. It snows, and snows, and sleets, and snows, and drifts, and blows, and sometimes hails, daggers of ice flung horizontally during spectacular displays of lightning and thunder and driving wind; but it never rains.

To most of the people in Arra, the question is not so much why the Council waited so long to send an army to 'rescue' Echoes, but why it's sending one at all.

The stairs spiral down from Dritte's room to the main hall of the complex where she lives. The rest of the building is bland compared with her quarters: nondescript geometry and purely functional furniture lacking style of any kind. From the hall I pass through the cluttered kitchen area to another door and another set of steps. These angle sharply downward into the tunnels.

The sensations that greet me are not what you'd expect in an enclosed subterranean space. Musty odors of earth and stone, mildewed condensation, torchlight and smoke, yes? Cold, dank, foreboding?

No.

What isn't known about Echoes, what isn't discernable in outward appearances, is that it does have some unique qualities. For instance, in digging our mines the Drun discovered caves and crevices through which natural hot springs flowed, water Lyhian engineers then channeled into pipes to heat all of our public buildings and the private homes of our more affluent citizens. Running water, *hot* running water, indoor plumbing – not even many aristocrats in Hoxa can make that claim.

But the real miracle is in the transformation of the tunnels themselves. Biolight wood not only provides illumination for us, but it is also used with the spring waters to create vast underground gardens. These amazing farms, resurrected from the ruins of spent mines, yield enough produce to feed us, our

menagerie of livestock, and the entire province of Cellan, with enough left over to stockpile or export as we choose. Thus, while nothing grows *in* Echoes, many things grow *under* it.

Even in the walkways that are nothing more than passages, the delightfully verdant aromas of living plants waft in from the gardens, along with the healthy but less pleasant scents of animal waste. The arching walls are lined with biolight panels, banishing all shadows and washing everything in its white radiance. Animal noises merge with the comforting hum of water rushing through pipes.

I have come to love it down here.

Anyone can use the walkways, but few Lyhians are allowed into the gardens. I am one who is, and I often go out of my way just to stroll through the vegetation, to watch the pigs and goats and geese in their pens. You cannot know what a revelation this is if you haven't spent a lifetime enduring the hard realities of an icebound city.

I slip through a side tunnel, where I encounter a rather placid Drun guard. He grunts a warning at me before his poor brain registers who I am. He then nods his head, resentfully, I think, if Drun can be said to feel resentment, and steps aside.

I enter an exotic green world of heat, humidity, and abundance. Drun farmers hoe fallow rectangular plots, or spread manure, or pick corn and carrots, cabbage and peas. There are grapes and cucumbers and tomatoes, too, peppers and sprouts and melons, in different stages of ripeness to ensure we have food the year round. Of all the twelve provinces, perhaps only Bylar can claim to reap such bountiful harvests.

Dritte has given this to us. She has given us self-sufficiency. Before her, we had to import our every need. Now we want for very little: wood, soil, and fuel oil, mostly, and with her connections those are easily obtained from Drunland.

I stop briefly at a pen where a fat spotted sow suckles her young. Admittedly, she is ugly and smelly, but her piglets are cute. I'd pet one of the babies, but I'm told sows can get mean if they feel their litter is threatened.

I smile. "I think you're beautiful," I say, and it isn't quite a lie, for her mere presence here is cause for joy.

The Drun who tend the gardens don't seem to like me coming into their tunnels, although they've seen me here often

From that vantage point we saw our first Drun. It was stout and muscular, only a little taller than us, judging by its size compared to adult Lyhians, but clearly fully grown

enough. They lower their eyes as I pass, an inherited memory, perhaps, from their ancestors' slave days; a habit they can't break even now. I never feel threatened by them, but I sense their anger at my back. Who can blame them, after the way they've been treated by my kind?

On a whim I pause to kiss an adult male on his hairless cheek. He is flustered like a schoolboy and, almost immediately, as awkwardly and obviously aroused as one. But he makes no aggressive move. His ruddy skin simply darkens a shade and he returns to tilling his plot.

Oh, isn't it ironic that even with Dritte in charge, it is *still* the Drun who are doing the hard labor?

I ascend the stairs that lead into the building where Dritte holds court. It seemed nothing would prod the Council into mustering its army. Hoxa is unaware of our pleasant little secrets; to the people there, Echoes is a piece of worthless real estate. Left to its own inclinations, the Council would have given us up to Dritte. After all, how could it afford to acknowledge a Drun problem here when Drun were never supposed to *be* here?

But my mistress has a plan and refuses to be ignored. Her initial coup was almost bloodless: the Lyhians in Echoes were terrified and outraged, but unharmed and relatively unhindered in their normal routines. When Hoxa failed to respond, Dritte – ruthlessly and in cold blood, yes – began to execute the local leaders, and when that still didn't work, random innocent citizens. Word of Drun atrocities eventually leaked to the general public throughout Arra, along with whispered rumors (spread by Dritte's agents, including me) that she has territorial aspirations that extend beyond Echoes.

That put every Lyhian at risk, not just the ones in some former mining town in a cold wasteland, an outpost not so much on the fringe of civilization as forgotten by it. Whispers became outcries; and with unrest and, more importantly, elections imminent, the recalcitrant politicians finally proclaimed their intent to raise an army to march to Echoes, where they promised to "assert Lyhian dominance over the filthy subhuman invaders and protect the purity of our people."

Subhumans. Dominance. Purity – words to stir the blood of

the ignorant masses.

We all had a good laugh, Dritte and I, her ministers and her spies.

The war room is in the chamber that once served as the mayor and city council's meeting hall. (They're all dead now, victims of Hoxa's indifference and Dritte's terrible tactics.) I'm comfortable in my mistress's presence, and the odd farmer or two, but I admit, even now I find it a bit unnerving to be the only Lyhian in a mob of Drun warriors, all fully armed and bedecked in thick leather armor. Hundreds of them have gathered to hear Dritte's latest pronouncements. They appear to be slack-jawed, dull-witted brutes whose language, what remains of it after the Fever, sounds more like the grunting of pigs. Imagine what the Council of the Twelve would think if they knew what awaits its army: *Gods, that woman is going to put weapons into the hands of those mindless, undisciplined beasts? They're uncontrollable! Better to pour arrows into the maw of a whirlwind and let them fly where they will!*

I look into the eyes of the Drun, and I see nothing. No evil, or savagery, or even anger; their eyes are without emotion, without humor, without love, without intelligence, without purpose. They are docile. And yet when Dritte walks into the room, when she gives them her smile and her intensity, those Drun eyes come alive with passion, united by the strength of her will into one cohesive unit that exists only to do her bidding.

And her bidding is war.

"Some months ago," she announces, "I sent Kivam on a mission to Hoxa to persuade the Council's crowmaster, when the time came, to send the same information to me that he does to his masters. As you can see, Kivam has considerable charms, but she betrays her own kind with beauty. She gave the crowmaster sex and promised him love, and he has been our man ever since. Her treachery has paid off."

I am appalled. Dritte has, for all practical purposes, just labeled me a whore.

"I have just received word," she continues, "that the Army of the Twelve is approaching the village of Kai. It is eight thousand strong and gaining volunteers at each village it passes."

At this, all Drun eyes focus on me. Is it admiration or loathing that burns in those orbs? Any confidante of Dritte's must command high status; yet traitors are often despised even by the side they serve. I'm their ally, yes, but I'm also a Lyhian; if I will betray my own people, can I be trusted not to betray them later? Are their ravaged brains capable of such subtle questions?

Theirs, who knows? But Dritte's is. Surely she doubts that my loyalty will hold in the long run.

"Eight thousand Lyhian soldiers," she continues, "many times our number. Are we afraid? Are we intimidated?"

Every Drun warrior begins to pound the butt of his spear on the ground and chant, in the language of Arra, "No! No! No!" Now, *that* is intimidating.

Dritte silences them with a movement of her finger. "Good. As valuable as the crowmaster has been to us, it's time to sever his ability to communicate with Hoxa and so, unfortunately, with me. Our first step will be to kill his messenger crows."

It's a waste of valuable birds, true; but then, Dritte has been just as callous with human life recently.

And it makes sense: despite their numbers, the Lyhian soldiers must already be feeling isolated up here in this incomprehensible cold, cold beyond anything they've ever experienced. The loss of the messenger crows means they have no means of rapid communication with Hoxa, nor Hoxa with them. Suddenly they are alone in a vast frozen plain, as the province of Cellan slowly slopes upward to the Gymrin Hills. Once they get through Kai, the last village before Echoes, they will know there can be no hope of reinforcements, no hope, even, of informing their families whether they're winning or losing, alive or dead. Even if they send a rider, he cannot possibly get to Hoxa and back before the fighting, one way or the other, is over.

My mistress Dritte is a sly one, planting the seeds of despair before a single blow has been struck against a Lyhian soldier. She details other strategies to the gathering, then dismisses them and turns to me.

I am in awe of her deviousness, but hurt by what she said to the Drun.

"Well?" she says.

"Why did you do that?" I ask. "Why did you tell them about the sex, as if I'm some common whore?"

She waits just a moment too long to respond. Then she smiles. "So my people can see the viper in their midst. To make you, my beautiful snake, realize how dependent you are upon me. Traitors *are* hated by everyone. Where will you turn if we lose?"

"Surely you don't think that is possible."

"You are such an *entertaining* reptile."

The first time I saw a Drun I was eight years old. This was decades after the mines had been sealed. Our parents and teachers, if they talked about Drun at all, toed the line and claimed they'd been sent back to Drunland when the iron was gone. We knew the truth, though, even then. Everybody did. The older children would whisper stories in darkened rooms about strange creatures scrabbling beneath our feet – none of us knew what a Drun looked like then – and suddenly every night sound, every creaking door or window, every rustle in hidden alleyways became a monster lurking just beyond our vision. It was scary, and it was fun.

The fun ended one evening when I and several friends were playing in Whitehill Park. We were sledding down the slopes when we heard a commotion on the other side of the fence. People, many of them armed with clubs, knives, and spears, were hurrying through the newly fallen snow of our most recent blizzard toward the landfill, which was located just past the ice packing and export warehouse. They spoke in low, excited voices. We heard anger, and fear, and maybe outrage. Curious, we dropped our sleds and sneaked out the gate to follow behind, pretending, in the obvious and unclesver manner kids have, that we just happened to be going that direction anyway. The crowd had gathered in a circle around the part of the landfill where dozens of bags of unwanted food scraps were discarded every day. Usually this area was a haven for crows and rats, and the winterhawks that fed on them, but there were no animals this time.

Many folks had brought lanterns and torches, so the whole scene had an eerie, flickery effect. Their voices had grown savage and ugly.

We were small, and couldn't see through the tangle of adult bodies and legs.

Finally one of us got the idea to climb up another hill of refuse: broken down furniture, carriage wheels, concrete blocks, larger items melded together by ice and packed snow.

After several slips and nicked knees, we managed to scramble up the hill.

From that vantage point we saw our first Drun. It was stout and muscular, only a little taller than us, judging by its size compared to adult Lyhians, but clearly fully grown.

Even from a distance its skin appeared darker and rougher than ours, and its hair was that unflattering shade of red/brown we're all so familiar with now. Despite the cold, it was wearing only a light woolen shift, trousers, and some kind of crude sandals.

Four Lyhian men were restraining it while others bound its arms and legs with rope. I later learned that it had been caught scavenging, having emerged from some secret hole in the earth to feed on our scraps. It had long been rumored that Drun did



this, but to my knowledge this was the first one that had ever been captured. Once secured the Drun was thrown to the ground, where it lay snorting gusts of white breath through its too-large nostrils.

The mayor of Echoes was there. The *mayor!* He stepped forward to silence the crowd. "What shall we do with this creature?" he called, and torch shadows climbed up his wrinkled smile like the legs of spiders. His face was ghastly and cruel. It was the second most memorable thing about that night.

The people began to chant, "Death! Death! Death!" but when the mayor nodded the most terrible silence in the world fell upon the landfill. Nobody moved for what seemed like a very long time. Finally someone came forward and tentatively struck the Drun with a club. It was a thump in that cold, cold night, made hideous by the smallness of the noise and the truth of its meaning. I remember the stars were out as the day's storm clouds rushed away to the east. Another man used his club, and another, and then there was an unspoken decision that it would be *only* clubs; no knives or spears to give the helpless Drun a quick death. The frenzy began.

My friends and I could only gape in hushed awe. During the execution the adults neither exulted nor cried nor spoke. Strangely, they no longer seemed angry as they methodically swung their weapons, wreaking the ultimate punishment upon a creature whose only offenses were hunger and its species' audacity to survive its own burial. In that place in Echoes we kids heard the sickening, muffled pulse of wood against flesh and wool, whomp whomp whomp *crack*, and we saw blood spatter sweep in black arcs across the light of torch and lantern flames. At some point we became aware of a high-pitched keening, abject and plaintive, rising from amidst the assault. The frightened Drun – and I didn't have a word for it then, but I do now – was *bleating*.

I will never forget that heart-wrenching cry. Baa-a-a-aaa, baa-a-a-aaa, *please stop*, baa-a-a-aaa. Of course it never really spoke. To this day that bleating is my most vivid memory of that night, perhaps of my life.

The Drun eventually died, and so did part of me, for in that crowd I saw my father wielding a club, and my mother, watching.

"I suppose," Dritte says, reclining indelicately in her chair with one leg flung up over its armrest, "you think you're helping us out of some sense of deep social consciousness."

It is several days after her war council. The Army of the Twelve has advanced through Kai and is approaching the Gymrin Hills. Dritte's plan to murder their messenger crows was successful. Minor skirmishes north of Kai have resulted in a satisfactory number of Lyhian casualties. In celebration of those victories, I have just given Dritte the most intense

release she's ever known, better even than the drone Drun males who regularly service her.

She should be elated, but instead she's in a combative, sarcastic mood.

I roll over on my stomach, feel the soft satin sheets of her bed slide against my breasts. "I believe in your cause," I pout, but the pout doesn't work this time. "*In our cause.*"

She snorts, a hurtful, dismissive sound. "You believe in yourself, and nothing more. You like to be pampered, and you like to fuck. You'll sell yourself to anyone who'll offer you both."

I don't weep often, but this is so unfair. "What have I done?" I say, pressing my face into her pillow, staining it with my tears. "Why do you treat me this way?"

"Because you enjoy it. Because traitors deserve no better."

There are betrayals, and there are betrayals, and sometimes the smallest ones are the most devastating of all.

My parents died years ago in a carriage accident while en route to visit friends in Kai. Apparently they froze to death. We'd never spoken of the Drun in the landfill. If they knew I witnessed the atrocity, they chose not to mention it. Until their deaths we just lived our lives, and they were as loving and as bland as before, only now I hated them, *hated* them, because I knew the façade was a lie. Everything was a lie. The monsters below our feet were not monsters and the angels on the surface were not angels. Although I didn't help kill that poor Drun, and my parents weren't responsible for sealing them into the tunnels, I have since that night felt a sort of collective guilt, a guilt by reason of birth, by reason of species.

I didn't cry when I heard about their deaths. I was thirteen then, awash in the hormones of adolescence, and I was exploring the possibilities of my new body when a constable knocked on the door. I was more annoyed by the interruption than by the news he brought. Since I have no other living relatives, all that my parents owned should have been placed into a trust for me. Unfortunately, they owned nothing beyond what was needed to pay debts and back taxes. Even our home was rented. Therefore, no windfall awaited my coming of age. Arrangements had already been made with the orphanage before the constable came to tell me about the accident. I silently gathered my things and went away with him. He kept trying to comfort me, the idiot, when all I wanted to know was, Will I have a room of my own? Will I have privacy?

I did, and I did, more or less, and five years later I walked out into the world again as a legal adult, a woman. I needn't explain every detail about what happened in the orphanage during those years, because the experience is universal, I think, and the thousands of stories coming out of such places always boil down to variations on two or three common themes: the



usual mixture of good and bad, pleasure and pain, triumph and regret. When I left I had intimate knowledge of all of those things.

I drifted, as young women do, for a number of years, always in Echoes but never really feeling a part of it. I would have gone south to warmth and changing seasons, but if travel were cheap in those days, *nobody* would still live here. So I flitted from one run-down flat to another, always destitute, always a step ahead of greedy landlords, and always, *always*, wishing there were something more to life but fearing there was not. In Echoes – anywhere, I suppose – if a woman is not a wife or a mother, there are few opportunities for her. It's the curse of our sex. If you want to earn money . . .

Well. I earned money. It was not odious to me. After what I'd seen my fellow Lyhians do, nothing I ever did for financial gain provoked the slightest twinge of conscience. I got by, got a reputation, got better clients, and eventually got enough ahead to afford to rent a home of my own and a few luxuries beyond the necessities. I was satisfied; proud, almost, of how I'd carved a niche for myself in a city where most young women marry, or fail, or both.

But I wasn't happy, never that, and hadn't been since I was eight years old, when a murder in a dump made the concept of happiness seem obscene. The act was too big, my joys too fleeting. It was a barrier against which my every emotion crashed and broke and drained away.

No Drun was ever captured in Echoes again. I wasn't even aware of another sighting until Dritte came out of the ground with her warriors.

And then everything fell into place for me.

And has since fallen apart.

I'm in my own rented home now. Until the recent disagreement with Dritte, I hadn't been here for two months. The padding around the door does little to block the drafts. I'd forgotten how chilly this house can be, even with the constant running of the radiator Dritte had installed for me while I was away in Hoxa seducing the crowmaster. I curl up in blankets on my ordinary mattress and stare at the concrete ceiling of my bedroom. I tried to panel it once with painted plasterboard, but the material kept warping and crumbling to the floor. It didn't take many knocks on the head for me to get used to the concrete.

After our latest scene I said some things I probably shouldn't have. So did Dritte, but the absolute ruler of Echoes isn't bound by the same niceties required of her minions. She can have me put to death if she chooses to do so. She needs no reason, no pretext whatsoever. At least until the Army of the Twelve arrives, there's no one to challenge her authority. Certainly

the Drun warriors wouldn't intervene on my behalf. Should she prevail in the upcoming battle, I will forever be subjected to her terrible whims. If not, I can hardly expect kinder treatment from the Lyhians. Their method of execution for traitors, I've been told, is particularly grisly, and slow.

The enemy is around me, and in me, and nowhere are there friends.

For now, though, I think it amuses Dritte to leave me alive, especially since she has barred me access to the one place in Echoes I truly love, its underground gardens. I've done her bidding in every way, and willingly, and my reward has been humiliation, scorn, and punishment. I realize she's driven by the abuse her people have suffered at our hands for so long. I know that. The Drun didn't deserve our cruelty, true, but I was never part of that, and I don't deserve Dritte's.

I close my eyes and recall the lush growing plants, the colors, the smells, the soft and steady glow of biolight panels. I try to tell myself I'm like Echoes: cold on the surface, warm at the heart; but no capillaries of light flow through my body, no engines of pipes and valves pump heat. I sometimes wish the same Fever that takes the Drun in adolescence would claim me, erase my ability to think and to remember.

That last night together I begged Dritte to use her mental powers to compel me to be what she wants me to be. Take away my free will, my responsibility, my *choice*, I said, mold me into a mindless creature, a machine of flesh and blood, impervious to pain, one that exists only for your pleasure.

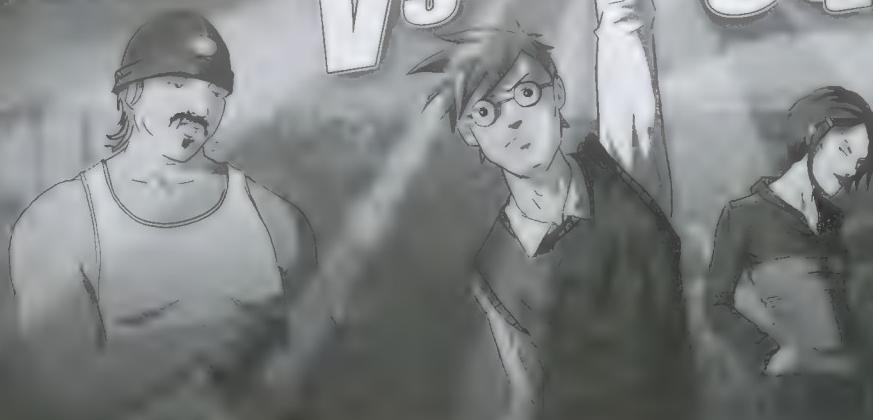
She only laughed, of course. "What fun would that be?" she said.

The army has reached the gates of Echoes. The night is still and the mists lay upon the city, coating every surface in a glittery patina of ice. From the doorway of my home I can see the red aura of Lyhian campfires spread out across the face of the Gymrin Hills. The muffled voices of thousands of frightened men waft to me through the fog. Somewhere out there, silently, the Drun warriors also wait.

I step out into the night, allowing the mist to enfold me in its comforting gloom. By the time I reach the street my vision is completely obscured except for a gap above me, an opening through which brilliant stars give light but no heat, beauty but no glimmer of hope.

Dave lives in Waterloo, Iowa. Although he visits England often and loves all things British, this was his first attempt to sell a story here. 'Kivam' uses characters and situations from a massive fantasy novel he's writing called *The Myth of Bones*. The title character is a minor player in the book, but Dave rather liked her so decided to reward her with her own story. Dave has sold stories to many literary journals, and about a dozen sf and/or fantasy stories to the likes of *Realms of Fantasy*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *Century*.

THE KANSAS JAYHAWK VS THE MIDWESTERN MONSTER SQUAD



PRESS START

New fiction by JEREMIAH TOLBERT

Title screen by Edward Noon



JOHN QUIÑONES: Did you ever imagine that you would make it this far, Mr President?

PRESIDENT POINDEXTER: John, you would be surprised how often I'm asked this question. Certainly, there was a tongue-in-cheek element to our party in the beginning, but I truly believe in our ideals. To answer your question, I never had any doubts. And does the Christian Bible not say, 'the geeks shall inherit the Earth?'

JOHN QUIÑONES: I believe it says 'the meek', Mr President, but given your success, that may have been a typo.

[20/20 Interview, December 3rd, 2028]

"Big . . . smackdown . . . comin'."

We'd been watching a cheap Taiwanese dino hack-job butt heads with a gigantified gibbon on TV – some territorial battle in a West African country with 'New' and 'Republic' in the name – when Scooter had run into the room, skidded to a stop between us and the vid-wall, and made his pronouncement.

"Oi, get the fuck out," Toni shouted and tossed a throw pillow at him. This was hardly unusual behavior, seeing as how she believed throw pillows existed solely for that purpose.

I should explain that Toni is my girlfriend, and a 'right proper' British gal. Me, I grew up in the wilds of Western Kansas – in an agrarian commune, actually – and if you're wondering why she was with me, you wouldn't be the first. She joked it was the folksy accent, but that was just a dig because my attraction to her was about 70% accent, 30% hips. I always figured the real reason Toni liked me was because I was the only guy in our BFM chapter that didn't have crippling body odor.

Scooter – he's a big feller in all three dimensions, and that means he never runs unless something momentous is about to happen. He was the most wired guy I knew and spent most of his time up in his room chatting with other Daij-heads around the world, so if he pried his ass out of his two thousand dollar maglev Aeron, you knew there was something major brewing. Presently, he dodged back and forth on his pudgy legs and tried to catch his breath as Toni continued to pelt him with cushions. A pile deep as his knees had collected at his feet already.

"Spit it out, man," I said. Eventually, we were going to convince him to go with some body-thinners, but his self-esteem was so low that he didn't believe they'd be an improvement.

"Big smackdown comin'," Scooter said again.

Toni rolled her eyes. "Jesus, mate. Ping us with an IM next time."

"No! We need to get on the road!" Scooter said. I'd never seen him so flush with excitement, except the time he scored one of the Big Guy's scales off eBay Japan. "You know how the Missouri Tiger's been marking territory over on our side of the border?"

"You think we live in a cave?" Toni took a glance around, smirked, and corrected, "A cave without 'net feeds?"

"No, yeah . . . I mean . . . anyway, it's shaking everything up, just like Kilroy predicted! The Jayhawk's on the move, and monsterologists are tracking the Nebraska Noog – he's headed right this way – and Iowa's Cornfed Carnage is moving in as fast as he can. We're talking the perfect monster storm here, guys, and it's supposed to hit *five miles* north of Overland Park in the next twenty four hours!"

Toni's eyes were wide and dancing around the room as she took in the news. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't excited myself; it was all I could do to keep from flying out of my seat and hooting like a happy owl. Here was the key to my senior thesis, unrolling a week before the due date. The Jayhawk's moping was creating a low monster pressure system which was drawing in the others like a vacuum. This was a gift from the Daij-Gods. The old Toho Men were smiling down on us.

"Toni, go get the gear!" I said, and she was up the steps before I finished the sentence. Ordinarily, a guy can't just boss his girl around like that (at least not without giving

up his nookie privileges), but in this instance I was issuing a direct order as President of the KSU chapter of the Big Fuh-freaking Monster Fan Club, and our charter specifically forbade violent retaliation (thank Heinlein).

I tossed the keys to my van to Scooter. He fumbled and bent over to collect them from the floor, but I was already headed out the door and didn't have time to give him hell. "Warm up the Battle Wagon. I'll raid the pantry."

Scooter giggled. "Pantry raid."

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[NYTIMES.COM headline, November 8th, 2028]

Westbound traffic on I-70 was heavy – damn near everyone east of Topeka had decided to take a spur-of-the-moment Rockies vacation. Seeing as how we were headed in the direction from which everyone was fleeing, I caught the occasional 'are-you-that-stupid' glance from passing motorists. I just nodded and smiled back.

I tried to get some shut-eye while Toni drove, but she kept joking about swerving into the wrong lane, and I kind of believed she'd do it.

I gave up on sleep and started going over the maps with Scooter. He'd pulled them down onto digiflex pads from the MTC site just before we left. Toni fiddled with the sat-radio until she hit a station that provided regular rampage updates: The Mech Division of the National Guard was on highest alert readiness; the governors of Missouri and Kansas were on non-stop flights to Washington to accept Daikaiju Act reconstruction checks from the President; construction contractors from Des Moines to Denver were drinking heavily in anticipation of new contracts.

"It's a good thing the big guys move so slow," Scooter said. "The MTC estimates this battle will do seven billion in damages. It sure would suck to be at ground zero."

"Anyone still at ground zero right now is already dead or is so bloody stupid they deserve to be," Toni said, passing a rental car full of Japanese tourists with gear I would have died for. Hopefully the tourists would upload their data to the 'net afterwards. I was going to need everything I could find to prove my theory, which concerned using predictive weather modeling as a basis for *daikaiju* behavior modeling. Creatures their size were not subject to ordinary animal behavior principles, I believed, but were real forces of nature. I figured I could get twenty pages out of it, easy, if things went the way they looked like they would.

I whistled at the red lines painted across the smart map. "Highfill wants primary sources, I'll give him primary sources. He can't give me less than a B with this brewing."

"What was it you needed to pass the class?" Toni asked sweetly.

"At least a B+," I grumbled.

Scooter sneered. "Too much time chasing BFMs," he faux-whispered to Toni.

"Nah, too much time in the sack with me, love." Toni looked back to leer, and the van drifted over onto the wake-up strip. I flushed; I wasn't as comfortable with that kind of talk as she was, me being an innocent farm boy and all.

Scooter shot me a you-lucky-bastard look, and I rolled my eyes. "We need to figure the best vantage point. Did you pull topographies?" He nodded and the map reloaded. We set to examining the landscape, arguing over which

bump might provide marginally better views of the battle, and Toni drove on through the night.

The big guy had been sulking down in the southeast corner of the state around Coffeyville when Tiger had made her move. It'd taken a while for the big cat's pheromones to waft south, but as soon as the 'Hawk had caught a whiff, he'd perked right up.

I was most happy about that. I knew the monsters were dumb as a fish (hell, a few of them, like Mississippi Mal, *were* fish), but the three of us had a theory – an anthropomorphic one that would have never flown in Highfill's class: the Jayhawk was *disappointed* with his territory. Scooter's personal belief was that our Jayhawk must have caught a glimpse of Manhattan Island from the BFM labs before being shipped out for release, and had been longing for a real metropolis to stomp ever since.

I wasn't so sure. Sometimes, you just *know* that things are better elsewhere. Grass, fence, other side, etc. Toni, meanwhile, had wagered that Jayhawk had a severe case of blue balls. That was impossible, of course, given we only called it a 'he' because it was convenient. The BFMs were gender neutral.

"All this moving around means he's coming out of it," I said. "His funk. I was starting to think he never would."

"You'd be demoralized too if a ten story tall Tiger laughed at your most powerful attack," Scooter said.

"Face facts, boys. He's a pathetic one, he is," Toni said. "I mean, it's cute that you care so much, but there's no way he can win this."

"Shut up!" "Can too!" Scooter and I said simultaneously. Toni laughed at us.

Truth was, neither Scooter nor I wanted to admit it, but the Jayhawk was lame by most standards. New Jersey had its Devil. Her flame-strike could light up the sky for miles and miles around. Oregon's Sasquatch was so powerful it set off a 4.1 minquake when it battled the Californian GoldFist with his super-pummel attack!

And what was the Jayhawk's special power? The Sunflower Burst, a theta-radiation blast – which had never worked right, not even in the earlier clones.

In the Jayhawk's first tangle with the Tiger, he'd triggered his Burst too early. He glowed green for a second, but nothing happened. The Tiger had laughed and walked away. *Laughed!* Well, it looked like laughing anyway.

I sighed, and leaned back into the seat. Toni was right; Jayhawk was the worst of underdogs. We might as well have been rooting for the Delaware Credit Beast.

Much like the New Republican Party, the Otaku Party (formerly known as the Geek-Nerd Party) began as a joke in a North Western dorm room between party founders F. Darin Fitzgerald and Lewie Brown. Spreading rapidly across the 'net through chat rooms and pop-blogs in the year leading up to the primary season in February of 2016, the party quickly became an in-joke among the nation's youth. It would have remained a joke if not for Generation Z, who had been raised on the magic ingredients of Japanese videogames, comic books, science fiction, and political activism. Generation Z's ideas of a better future were distinctly different . . . and more fun, to say the least.

[AHHH, Godzilla! How the Otaku Movement Crushed U.S. Politics Second Edition, 2030]

This close to the monster rampage the only traffic we saw was cops. We were speeding but had no worries – the club decals on the Battle Wagon kept them from pulling us over. One swarthy looking cop even pulled up parallel to the van and gave us the peace sign. It was good to see fellow Otaku serving the public like that.

"There's a lot of visual clutter up here," Scooter said. The area homes were built nearly touching in Tokyo-chic, and they blocked out the view to the east.

Toni pulled over next to a two-story ultra-modern and turned off the car. "That one looks as good as any, yeah?"

I nodded. "Sure. Come on, Scooter. Help me with the ladder."

Toni waited by the van in case the cops came by while we were setting up and mistook us for looters. We'd taken to the rooftops during the Wichita Wreck last year, and the cops were real old-school over there. They'd arrested us and impounded the van for a week while they 'checked out' our credentials. Unfortunately, finals had been that week. Scooter's parents almost didn't let him come back in the fall, and Toni had lost her scholarship. Technically, she wasn't supposed to be in the country, but nobody was about to turn a body like that into Immigration.

Up on the roof, we could see the seven or eight other chapters who had set up watch posts in the neighborhood. There were even a few teams set up down below – the only lights that didn't run in neat little lines along the highways.

"Look at those wankers," Toni said, staring through a pair of infospecs. I brought mine up and registered the others' data tags. The Independence chapter was set up less than a mile from ground zero on the roof of a grade school. "Why aren't we down there with them, eh?"

"They're monster chow," Scooter said. "I hope their clone policies are up-to-date."

I shuddered. I was a little bit old-fashioned when it came to full-body cloning. I'd never died. Scooter neither. Sure, I kept my policy up-to-date and my backups fresh, but I still believed in a soul. My parents did too, and, well, it's hard to shake those kinds of beliefs. I'm not too sure about Scooter – I think maybe he was just averse to any sort of pain. Toni had died five or six times, chasing Euro-monsters.

"Heh." Toni tilted her head, staring off into space. "Slashdot2 is calling the opposition the 'Midwestern Monster Squad'."

"That's going to piss off folks back East who think we're part of the 'Plain States,'" I said. "Hey, Scooter. What's the latest tracking info?"

"Jayhawk is seventeen hours out. The Tiger is . . ." Scooter flipped his specs down and scanned. "There! I've highlighted her on your fields." A tiny red speck appeared on the horizon to the north.

"She's in Missouri?"

Toni was mumbling into her subvocal microphone, using it to order info from her specs. "She's coming back from a cattle yard. Impressive little minx! She did fifty grand in damages for a snack."

"Too bad 'Hawk's a vegetarian," Scooter lamented.

"Seventy percent of the state grows corn, wheat, or soybean," I said. "He wouldn't do any refundable damage if he was a meat-eater."

"I guess that's true," Scooter said. "I think I'm going to get some sleep. You guys want the van? I can sleep up here with the instruments if you want."

"You're a saint," Toni said, leering again in my general direction. BFM's always made her hot, for which I thanked Miyazaki, Iwata, and Kurasawa every night.

As Levinson predicted, there was a surplus of human labor during the transition to a post-scarcity economy. Otaku Party founders developed the daikaiju economic stimulus plan to produce demand for labor and raw materials. The gengineered giant beasts, harkening back to the radiation scare films of the 1950s, struck a chord with voters. Two years after President Poindexter's inauguration, New York and New Jersey passed bills authorizing the construction of the first state-funded daikaiju, and other states soon followed. Before the end of Poindexter's first term, the first generation daikaiju were stomping their way to millions in federal funds.

[*Monster Economics*, G.D. Levinson, Richard Tenn, et al]

Sunlight streamed through the van's rear window and burned through my eyelids until I finally gave up pretending to sleep and slipped out to check on Scooter and the gear. I about fell over when I saw the pretty twenty-something with blonde pigtails chatting him up at the foot of the ladder. Oh, no, I thought. *Her*.

"That's so clever," she said, giggling.

Scooter noticed me and waved me over. "Hey Kilroy. I was just telling Lohusa about our theories."

"Oh, 'Lohusa' is it?" I squinted at her. "Hi there. Boy, you're pretty brave to still be around here."

She smiled. "You think?"

"Which chapter are you with now?" I said, not smiling.

"Independence," said Lohusa, whose real name was Allison. "I thought I should come up and deliver the news personally. We're going for a quad-state record today."

I laughed so hard I must have woke up Toni. She groaned something obscene in the van. "What a waste of clone stock," I said. "Shame you have to go and spend your parents' money like that."

"Kilroy –" Scooter stammered and turned red.

Her smile faded and was replaced with a cold glare. "At least we've got the *tanukis* to try. Your chapter's just a bunch of *boushounen*. Well." She looked over to Scooter. "Some of you."

The ground rumbled. All three of us froze. Toni even stumbled out of the van, looking every which way, about to give herself whiplash.

"Tiger," Allison said with a sneer.

"No," I said. "Jayhawk. Tiger's sig is a four-part patter. Jayhawk makes short air hops. Single boom."

Allison blushed. "I hope you kids enjoy the show from the nosebleed section!" She turned and fled downhill.

"Good sig ident, Kilroy," Scooter said. He avoided looking me in the eye.

"Thanks." I should have scolded Scooter for talking to the enemy, but they'd exploited his weakness for somewhat cute women. "What's the status of our friends?"

"Did I hear that right?" Toni asked, pulling up the zipper on her pants. "They're going for a simultaneous distance record on all four?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Scooter said. "Jayhawk is ahead of schedule. You were right about that. He's closing in quicker than we figured. Tiger is holding. And get this: The Noog and the Cornfed Carnage are traveling together. They're

headed straight south from Omaha. ETA of six hours."

"What are we going to do while we wait?" Toni asked, sidling up to me with one of her grins.

"You might want to update your backups. We're moving camp in twenty minutes."

"I think I'm rubbing off on him," Toni said to Scooter, laughing.

Toni took the wheel again as Scooter and I conferred on our plan of action. The sat-radio was abuzz with talk of the smackdown. Las Vegas had odds on the Jayhawk of sixteen-to-one. "Love, you want me to place a bet for you?"

"Nah," I said. "I can't take sucker money like that." It was a lame attempt at false bravado. The Jayhawk was going to get *creamed*. Even so, he was *our* BFM, and that meant something.

"Do you think this is such a good idea, moving in closer?" Scooter asked.

"Do you want to lose our record?" I countered. "You weren't scared the last time."

"But . . . well . . ." Scooter hedged. "He's all riled up now," he finished lamely.

"We have a chance for a four-monster record here," I said.

"This is about that girl, isn't it?" Toni called from the front. "You know her."

"You do?" Scooter looked at Toni, then back at me, curious.

"Let's talk about something else."

"Oh no. I don't think so. An ex-girlfriend?" Toni said. I nodded reluctantly.

"I guess the break-up didn't happen on good terms?"

"The only reason she's a chaser is to get back at me," I said. I wasn't interested in talking about my past, what there was of it anyway.

"She was kind of cute," Toni said. "She could do better than you though."

"Ha ha."

"What did you do to her?" Scooter asked.

"What?" I pretended to be confused.

"Why does she want to get back at you?" he pressed.

"She talked to you for ten minutes and you're taking her side?" I massaged my temples and closed my eyes. "Forget about it. We need to find a safe place to set up, closer than the Independence team."

Scooter grumbled and turned away to look at the maps. It was just like my ex to get her talons into my best friend like that. What was supposed to be a simple four BFM smackdown had suddenly gotten complicated. Times like this, I wished I had taken up pocket monster breeding instead.

My fellow Americans, I believe it is time to stop living in the Twentieth Century. There is no reason for the senseless loss of life that occurs in our country every day. Medical technology has come a long way. We can rebuild you; bigger, faster, stronger! Under my administration, medicine will be free of the shackles of superstition and fear. Regenerative cloning is just the first step. Our goal will be nothing less than the abolishment of death.

America, I will give you save points.

Also – bionics are really cool. Cyborgs will get more girls. And ladies, I have two words for you: 'it vibrates'.

[Presidential hopeful Alfred Poindexter. Presidential Debates, 2028]

We parked on Overland Park High's football field and took to the bleachers. It was too soon to guess where the monsters would clash, but we needed some perspective on the situation. Once we'd climbed up high, we spotted him. The colossal blue and red bird was gliding down gracefully from one of his hops. It was a minute before we felt the aftershocks of his landing.

Toni shook her head. "I've been meaning to ask you guys something."

Scooter rigged up the mini-Doppler and flicked at the monitors until they lit up. "What?"

"Don't you think . . ." Toni giggled.

"Think what?" I had nearly shouted that. Scooter flinched away.

"Never mind," she said. Oh great. Now she was going to pout.

"Okay, fine." I didn't have time for this. "He looks like a chicken. It was the best base stock to match the mascot."

Toni cocked her head and squinted. "Yeah, hey. You're right. I would have never noticed that if you hadn't pointed it out."

Scooter coughed hard. It sounded a little like 'dumbass'. I sighed. "Will the gear be safe here?"

He nodded. "They're going to clash a mile north and three miles east, I think. But we're going to need a tarp. Looks like a storm is coming in." Black thunderheads were gathering to the west. Jayhawk was passing by a couple of miles east. He was hopping and gliding faster than I'd ever seen him move. I wasn't sure about Scooter's estimate, but he'd never been wrong before.

"Let's set up and get moving on foot."

Scooter groaned, and Toni did runner stretches. I scanned the horizon with my specs, tracking the Independence team's tags. Already, there was the smell of ash on the wind.

I took a walk down the bleachers to clear my head, but I didn't have much luck.

"You're getting a bit snippy, love." Toni could be quiet when she wasn't running her mouth, and she startled me. I smiled sheepishly.

"Sorry."

"That girl. What's the story?"

"Do I have to tell you?"

"If you don't, I'm withholding sex for a month. It's your call."

I flopped onto a bench and rubbed my temples. "I told you we dated?"

She nodded. "Stop stalling."

"Okay, okay. Well. I dumped her. Er, stood her up."

"And now you're arch-enemies? How American."

"No, there's more. There was this dance."

"Ooh, I've seen this movie."

"I'm trying to be serious here. I was supposed to take her to the harvest dance. We never talked about it, but it was assumed. Only, the night of the dance, the Texas Twister was rampaging through Amarillo, and it was only a seven hour drive."

"Pff. Typical. And you didn't even call her to cancel." Toni bit her lip and shook her head, mocking me.

"Yeah, well. She was cheating on me anyway, not that it matters. When I didn't show up, she marched over to my house. I used to have this collection of action figures. She torched them. Even Boba Fett."

"Torched?"

I grimaced. "You could see the bonfire four blocks away. She was arrested for arson, and then resisting arrest. But, you know how small towns are. She got off on community service."

"Don't tell me any of this came as a surprise. A woman scorned, and all that," Toni said.

"It was just a dance. Those action figures were the most important thing I'd ever owned. I still miss them." I hastened to add, "Once in a while, anyway."

Toni rolled her eyes. She was a champion at rolling her eyes; a silver medalist at least. "You are so clueless."

"What! I was going to make it up to her. She didn't have to get all *drastic*." I was annoyed that not even Toni understood the seriousness of Allison's betrayal.

"I'm going to say this once, love. If you ever leave me waiting in a prom dress while you go off to chase BFM's, the nicest bloody thing I will do is set fire to your prized possessions."

I blinked. "You'd wear a prom dress?"

Then she slugged me on the shoulder, and it really hurt. I would have a bruise for days.

Finally, DARPA had been given the license to do in reality what we had been doing on paper since the beginning; create our dreams. Under Poindexter, our budgets quadrupled. The halls of our research facilities rang with laughter that would not have been out of place in a 1950s Sci-Fi movie. It was disturbing at first, but you eventually became accustomed to it. You were too busy trying to perfect a mobile weapons platform or grey-goo nanobot swarm of your own.

[*Portrait of a Fevered Mind*, Emmit Haines, PhD]

We waited atop the bleachers and watched the Noog and the Cornfed Carnage come in from the north. The Noog looked lame, kind of like a giant purple booger (actually modeled on the Blob only they couldn't get the rights to the name), and Carnage was essentially a giant ear of corn atop a writhing mass of tentacles. Silly looking, but both were formidable foes. Noog engulfed anything in its path and Carnage's Rocket Kernel attack could take out a small town.

The National Guard was keeping pace with them in their gleaming gun-metal 'mechs, trying to limit the innocent casualties and helping with evacuations. Some hotshot was pulling in close, drawing fire from Carnage, and peppering him back with anti-BFM rounds. The network feed drones were zipping all around, eating up the footage. Toni was fuming; BFM's were supposed to be left in peace to battle with other BFM's.

"It's the bloody law," she said, and strung together twenty obscenities for good measure. Just then, Carnage nailed the hotshot with a volley of missiles and the mech went up in a puff of titanium vapor. That had to hurt so bad the guy's clone would feel it. The other Guardsmen drew back quickly.

"That was cool," Scooter whispered, forgetting for a moment that we would be within range of that same attack soon.

"Hey . . ." Toni said. She turned away from the battle towards the east. "Where did Jayhawk go?"

"What?" I searched the horizon myself. He had been less than a mile away a few minutes before. "How did we lose a two hundred foot tall red 'n' blue chicken?"

Scooter scrambled over to the equipment. "I've got nothing."

"Can he teleport now?" Toni asked.

"Not that I know of," I said. The storm front from the west was moving in fast. Some of the rumbling rolling across the plains was actually thunder. It looked as if things would be turbulent in all kinds of ways.

"Okay, let's get moving. I taught Allison everything she knows about BFM's, and if I know her like I think I do, she's going to make her attempt while the BFM's size each other up. That's our chance too."

"Love, do you know the records for the others?"

I shrugged. "Scooter?"

Scooter pulled down his specs and accessed his records. "Carnage: 1200 meters. Noog: 800 meters. Tiger . . . oh, held by Allison and friends at 700 meters. They'll ignore her until after we make a pass." Scooter grinned. "And Jayhawk:" he said, beaming, "400 meters."

"Right then," Toni said, cracking her knuckles just because the sound irritated me. "I say we go for Carnage first. Then Noog, then Tiger, and then we'll get even closer to the 'Hawk," Toni said. It annoyed me that she was trying to call the shots, but I started thinking about Allison, and that was the kind of thing that had gotten me into trouble with her.

"Okay, sounds like a good plan," I said. "Let's move."

"We still going to do this on foot?" Scooter said, eyes wide. He sighed. "I had better take a power-up then." He retrieved an empty-seeming vial and dermal injector from his belt pouch and socketed it to his neck. It made a soft hissing sound as it injected its contents.

"Little Fast-Twitch to get me going," he said. Already, I could see his arms rippling with the quickly replicating nanites. He was going to be one sore bastard in the morning.

"Got any more?" Toni asked hopefully. He shook his head. "Right then." She turned to me. "Lead away, stud."

A predicted side effect of the BFM economic stimulus project was the financial failure of several entertainment sports leagues. Frankly, there was no way two greasy men pretending to wrestle could compete for viewership with twenty story tall behemoths doing it for real in lower Manhattan.

[*Monster Economics*, G.D. Levinson, Richard Tenn, et al]

The BFM's hadn't done much damage yet, just what we called locomotive damage. Once the fighting started, Overland Park would basically cease to exist. Not that many would miss it.

We hopped a fence and jogged double-time on a path toward Carnage. My specs were set to auto-track the Independence team. Their team waited half a mile off, and still the Jayhawk was nowhere to be seen. Allison's plan had to be the reverse of ours. One way or another, someone was going to lose a record tonight.

"How far do you want to push it on Carnage?" Scooter asked between wheezes.

"Minus fifty," I said.

"Minus hundred?" Toni gave me puppy-dog eyes.

"Let's not get greedy," I said. "We don't keep the records if we turn chow."

"Fine then," she growled. "Race you there!" And she was off. Just then, the Independence team headed for the Tiger. Odd.

Scooter was too out of breath to talk, even with the boosters, so he sent me a spec-to-spec instant message.

Scooter: *What are they doing?*

Kilroy: *No idea. Try to keep up. Toni's going wild again.*

Scooter: *Screw that. Carnage isn't going anywhere.*

He was right. The BFM's were in position and they'd started checking one another out. Tiger was sniffing the air and growling, a sound like twin 747's taking off. The Noog was shivering all over, twitching and sending off pseudopods to taste the air. Carnage's tentacles were digging in for the fight, kicking up a fog of dirt that rolled out into the streets. I was starting to lose sight of Toni, so I sped up.

Toni: *You don't think 'Hawk turned and ran, do you?*

Kilroy: *Nah. He's around here somewhere. I can feel it.*

Just then, I felt a familiar boom and shake from the direction of the Tiger. In the dust, it was hard to make out, but a flash of lightning illuminated the sky . . . just as a certain blue and red bird landed *right* on top of the Tiger.

"Holy shit!" shouted Scooter.

"Woot!" Toni was doing a dance in the debris just ahead of me. "He was using the storm for cover. Cheeky bugger!"

A burst of pride welled up inside me, and the tears I had to rub away weren't just because of the mess in the air. The Independence team had veered off from Tiger and Jayhawk well outside their record ranges and had turned toward Noog.

The ground rolled and I nearly lost my balance. Behind me, Scooter bit it, and Toni just barely managed to stay upright.

"What the hell was that?" I asked. The dust had kicked up and I couldn't see anything more than ten meters in front of me.

"Tiger's down!" Scooter shouted. "The 'Hawk walloped her good."

"Shit! Where's he going now?" The air overhead filled with explosions. Popcorn, magnified five hundred times. "Never mind, I can guess! Turn back, now!"

We stumbled and staggered through the falling debris. Rain began to fall hard then, and thunder mixed with the sound of Carnage's missiles going off. None of them sounded like a hit, however. *Go boy, go*, was my only thought as we high-tailed it back south.

Kilroy: *Regroup on the bleachers. Copy?*

Scooter pinged back a second later. I waited for Toni's. Nothing. I kept running.

Kilroy: *Scooter, have you seen Toni?*

Scooter: *No. Y?*

"Shit."

I scanned for her tag, but the dust was so thick that the satellites had lost all tag signals. The explosions suddenly grew quiet. The only sound was that of debris and rain drops falling down all around, and klaxons, far off toward K.C. I nearly choked on all the smoke hanging in the air.

Kilroy: *I'm going to go back and look for her.*

Scooter: *It's your cloning. Good luck!!*

I stumbled through the rubble field, calling out Toni's name, and listening for movement overhead. For whatever reason, the BFM battle had stalled out, thank Toho.

"Toni!"

"Over here," a faint voice answered. I ran as fast as I could on the uneven terrain. I nearly knocked Allison over.

"Shit," I started to say, just before she clocked me. I don't think I got the word out before I hit the ground.

'Genetic engineering will save the world by creating super-productive crops and eliminating diseases.' We've all heard these promises before, but I ask that you open your minds to other possibilities of this wonderful science. My opponent would claim that we shouldn't play God, that we should 'play it safe'. Nonsense. The great Sid Meier taught us that playing God is totally sweet.

[Presidential hopeful Alfred Poindexter. Presidential Debates, 2028]

Funny thing was, Toni found me. She'd taken cover from heavy fallout in a Denny's and her signal had been muted out by all the bounce. I came to while she was pulling me out of the dust-fog.

"You need to stop trying to match Scooter's eating habits," she said, huffing.

"What the hell happened?" Then it came back to me. "She knocked me out!"

"And took three of the records too. But you still have the 'Hawk,'" she said, anticipating my question before it reached my lips.

"Who won?"

"Shouldn't you be saying things like 'how much blood have I lost?' and 'thanks for saving my superstitious ass instead of leaving me to be cloned'?"

"Well –"

She laughed. "That was hypothetical."

"Stop torturing me." I groaned. I felt light-headed, like maybe I had lost some blood. "Who won?"

"Your boy, of course. You sure know how to pick them, love."

The Jayhawk's absence from the northern part of the state clearly created the equivalent of a low pressure system, drawing monster aggression from neighboring territories. The resulting clash of BFM's resulted in an exponential increase in damage, similar to the effect caused by a super-storm. Naguchi's hurricane damage predictive modeling deserves serious consideration as a tool for estimated future BFM damages. In conclusion, I would like to add that the Jayhawk totally kicked ass and the smackdown was the most awesome thing I have ever seen.

[A New Method for BFM Behavior Modelling, Senior Thesis, Kilroy Ackors]

I had an e-mail from Allison waiting while I recovered. She flaunted her new records, each 100 meters under the previous, and generously informed me that we were 'even now'. I had something to say about that, but it would have to wait until later.

I managed to get my paper in on time, and Highfill grudgingly gave me a B+. Come graduation, I actually had to make plans. I hadn't really been figuring on making it out of school that year.

Toni convinced Scooter and I that we needed to look for work in Europe. The EU has been adopting the BFM economic stimulus plan too, and they were going to need experienced monster chasers. I've got some applications out over the 'net. I'm looking forward to seeing Transylvanian MegaBat's drain attack. They say it's unstoppable! Yeah, well, we'll see about that when they send the Jayhawk on tour like the Governor is talking!

But enough about us. You want to know what happened to the Jayhawk.

The running theory is that he wasn't sulking all that time. He'd planned the whole thing as an *ambush*. The gene jockeys are scanning his make-up looking for an explanation for his unusual cunning. Whatever the case, he's got the run of four states for about six months while the others recoup on Monster Island. He made a mess of St Louis and the MTC forecasts 'some stormy weather' for Des Moines next week. I always knew he had it in him!

While I've been convalescing, I've watched every video I could find of the now famous battle. There was just no contest. Jayhawk used wing-beats to deflect Carnage's missiles back at him. Too bad Iowa's gene jockeys never thought to proof the Carnage against his own attack. That took him out, and Jayhawk went straight for Noog, didn't even stop to gloat over the slaughter.

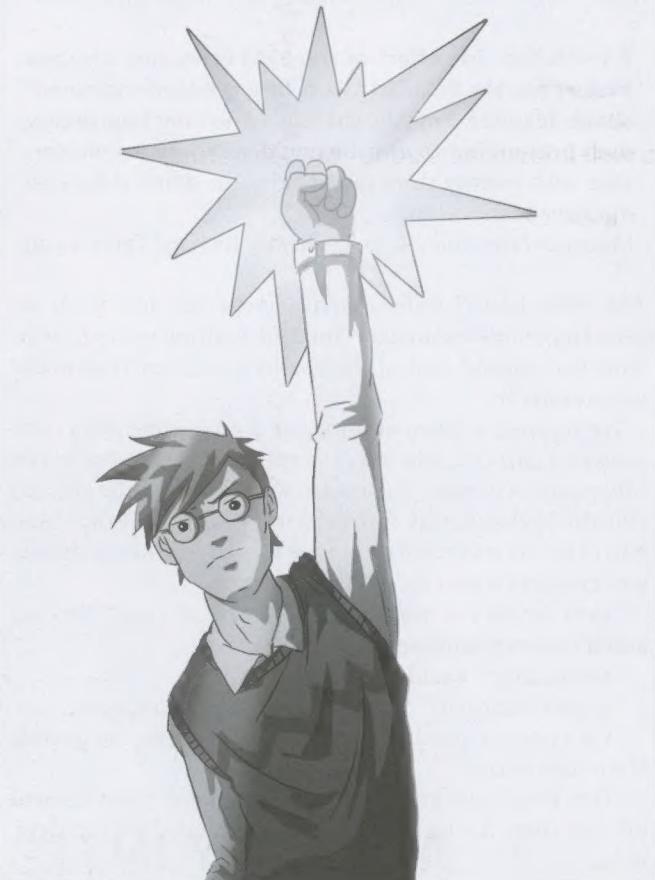
For a few minutes, it looked like the Noog was going to get the best of our boy. The Noog had him engulfed from beak to toe, and then there was a flash of light inside, and the Noog disintegrated.

The problem with the Jayhawk's Sunflower Burst wasn't the power. It was range. I can't tell you much about what happened after that. Every time I watch the replays, I get a little misty-eyed. I'm man enough to admit it.

As I filed this report with you folks at Club HQ, he's on the main feeds right now. He's developed a strut, and it's a real crowd pleaser. Merchandising rights are through the roof. And I know giant mutated chickens don't have lips . . .

But I swear that big chicken is *smiling*.

This is Jeremiah Tolbert's first story for *Interzone*, but readers won't have to wait long for his second, 'This, My Body', which should appear in IZ198.



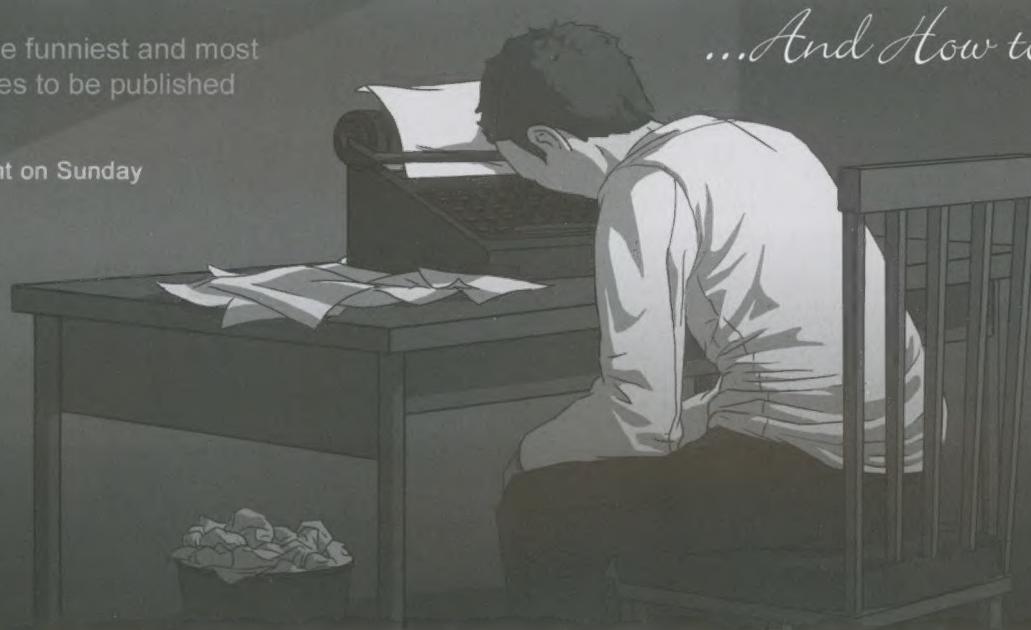
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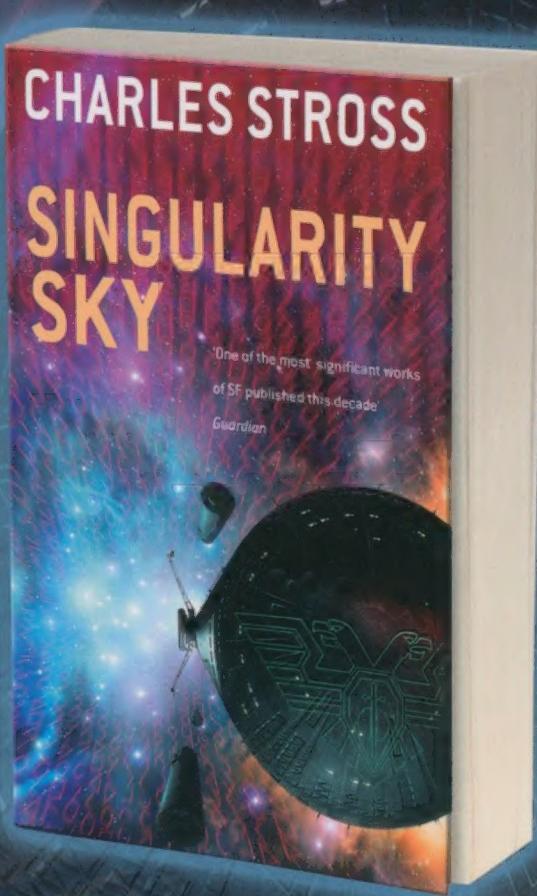
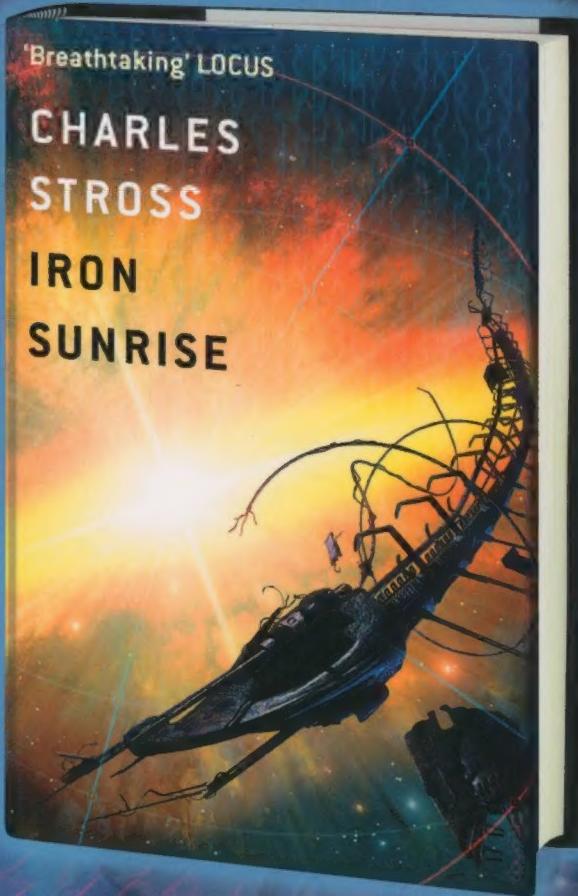
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